

Chapter 1 – Harry Opens His Eyes

Harry Potter wondered if any of his school mates hated the summer as much as he did. During the school year, he learned magic at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, but at the end of the term, he was returned to his relatives, the Dursleys. This included his magic-hating, Harry-hating Aunt Petunia who considered him a freak, her whale of a husband Vernon who considered him a worthless burden, and their bully of a son, Dudley.

Throughout the twelve years he had lived with them, he had been routinely denied food, forced to work ten-hour days doing all of the house and yard maintenance, and compelled to wear the ragged hand-me-downs of his grossly overweight cousin. His Aunt and Uncle had hoped to crush the magic out of him, but his acceptance at Hogwarts had demonstrated their failure and they were not pleased.

Now when he returned to them in the summer, they grudgingly allowed him a roof and minimal food – although it never was as much as the growing boy wanted – and kept him out of sight as much as possible when he wasn't doing his daily chores.

Today, he was locked in his bedroom looking through old newspapers. He had been surprised when his Aunt gave her halfhearted permission for him to use their old papers to line his owl's cage bottom. His argument that it showed how the family recycled items more than once let her realize that she could proudly lord it over the neighbors had been the incentive he needed. Of course, she didn't need to know that he read the entire paper first to give him an idea of what was happening outside of "Durskaban". If she had realized he gained anything from it, she would likely have denied him the use of the old newspapers.

He raised an eyebrow at the first article on the Metro section that read "Suspect shot and killed". Normally, the police didn't carry lethal weapons so he read the article curiously.

London police said Friday they shot and killed a man they believe was directly linked to an investigation of recent bombings in London's transit system. Typically, the London police, or "Bobbies" only carry a short, wooden truncheon, which they keep out of sight and may not employ except in self-defense or to restore order. Only

police on a dangerous mission may carry firearms for that specific occasion. The unnamed officer who killed the resisting suspect was placed on temporary leave and is receiving mandatory counseling.

Harry puckered his brow as he looked at the article and thought about his encounter with Professor Quirrell, who was possessed by Voldemort in his first year at Hogwarts. He had been nearly killed by a troll Quirrell let into the school, had nearly been thrown off his broom by the possessed Quirrell, was again attacked by him in the Forbidden Forest and then he had to fight for his life against the man at the end of the year. Only his mother's sacrificial protection kept him alive and left Quirrell dead with Voldemort's spirit on the loose.

Hedwig clicked her tongue on the roof of her beak, drawing his attention. She looked inquisitively at the paper in his hand and then tilted her head, staring at him with curious yellow eyes.

"What? Oh, this article?" He frowned at it again. "They're giving a police officer counseling because he had to kill someone." He looked back at Hedwig with a troubled face. "Why didn't anyone give me counseling after a professor tried to murder me multiple times and then I had to kill him or be killed? I was just an ickle firstie then and I killed a man, Hedwig! Why didn't anyone care about me?"

The snowy owl jumped down to his shoulder and nuzzled his cheek. He lifted a hand to scratch her neck as he added "I mean...it's not like I had much of a choice. He was trying to kill me. But they just sent me back here, where we were locked up and nearly starved besides trying to cope with killing Quirrell. Wouldn't you think they would be more concerned about a kid than a trained adult police officer?" Hedwig nibbled his hair comfortingly.

"You know, none of us were offered counseling after Lockhart and the basilisk this year either. Ginny was possessed and Lockhart tried to obliviate Ron and me. Plus I had to fight that bloody huge monster and kill Riddle's diary ghost. And then Mr. Malfoy tried to attack me too! In fact, not only didn't I get counseling after getting Ginny out of the chamber, but they kept me in the Headmaster's office talking for ages! I had been bitten by a freaking basilisk for Merlin's sake, even if Fawke's tears saved me! A basilisk that only Hermione figured out because none of the teachers seemed to know what was petrifying the students." Hedwig cooed softly and nuzzled him again.

Harry turned more pages in the paper, flipping absentmindedly through the business section as he thought about everything that happened in the last two years. He paused at the front page of the Education section when the blaring headline "Scandal Over Student Abuse" caught his attention and he began to read.

Horace Widdicombe, the Headmaster of Rosings secondary school was forced to resign in disgrace after it became known that he did nothing to stop one of the staff from insulting and mentally abusing the children under his care. That teacher, Mr. Rudis Vilis was charged with 12 counts of abuse under the Children's Act 1989.

Mr. Roland Standish, father of 12-year old Reise, angrily stated "Families pay £4500 per child to attend Rosings. We selected this school because we believed it would provide a quality education for our children. Now we discover that we were paying for a sadist to abuse and publicly humiliate our children and the Headmaster knew it was occurring. This breach of trust is unconscionable."

Virginia Pruitt, head of the school board said, "There is no excuse for deliberately failing to provide basic respect to our children. Each teacher should be actively working to develop a student's potential. Each staff member should honor and respect human dignity and emotional wellness. They should be models of fairness, openness and honesty. Parents trust their most valued treasures – their children – to us with the understanding that we will honor that trust. Mr. Vilis betrayed that basic trust through his words and actions."

The Children's Act 1989 states that abuse should be considered to have happened when someone's actions caused a child to suffer significant harm to their health or development. Significant harm is defined as someone punishing a child too much; hitting or shaking a child; constantly criticising, threatening or rejecting a child; sexually interfering with or assaulting a child; and not looking after a child - not giving them enough to eat, ignoring them, not playing or talking with them or not making sure that they are safe.

Harry snorted and then tipped his head at the bird still nuzzling him. "How do you suppose what that teacher did is different than what Snape or Filch do regularly, Hedwig? Both of them constantly criticize and threaten students. So do you think they would be found guilty of abuse? Of 'betrayal of basic trust' as the school board member said of the other teacher?"

Hedwig clicked her beak at him and seemed to nod her head. "You think so, girl?" He scratched her again as he thought. "Then what about the Headmaster? He knows everything that happens in the school. If the Headmaster of Rosings knew and had to resign in disgrace, what does that mean about Professor Dumbledore?" The owl snapped her beak as if biting something hard. Harry lowered his voice to a whisper. "Do you think Dumbledore knows and approves how the students are treated? Do you think he believes we deserve to pay to be abused by gits like Snape?"

"From what the story said about the Muggle teacher, Snape is a thousand times worse than him. Snape deliberately humiliates students all of the time. I remember when he broke my potion vial and gave me a zero for the day and just smirked at me. And he allows the Slytherins to throw things into the Gryffindor cauldrons." He snorted in disgust. "Snape certainly doesn't do anything to treat students with dignity much less act like a 'model of fairness, openness and honesty'. In fact, he's totally unprofessional in every way imaginable!"

The dark-haired boy frowned as he thought of the many accidents that occurred in the potions class under Snape's supervision and his train of thought followed another track. "Why do you suppose there are no special protective masks or other safety measures when we're dealing with so many risky ingredients? How often has Neville Longbottom blown up his cauldron? That's dangerous! And what about all the fumes from all those potions? And when someone is hurt, what happens? We're just told to go to the infirmary and docked points!"

Harry looked at his best friend with troubled eyes. "If I had another option, I don't think I would go back to Hogwarts, Hedwig. But what other options are there? Stay here at the Dursleys and go to Stonewall? Being away from the Dursleys, doing magic and having enough to eat makes everything else almost tolerable. But what if there was another choice? Wouldn't it be incredible if there was a year-round magic school? I would never have to come back!"

Harry sighed in longing at the thought of a year-round school. His imagination created a school where the teachers were friendly, helped the students and were competent – no ghosts who put students to sleep or incompetent teachers who couldn't teach

Defense; where students were safe from trolls, three-headed dogs, basilisks and possessed teachers and diaries; and where no one ever heard of Harry Potter or had impossible expectations of him that he could never meet.

Harry turned and stroked the snowy white owl softly. "Who am I, Hedwig? I spent ten years living in a cupboard under the stairs, was called a freak and told my parents were worthless drunks who died in a car crash. Then suddenly I'm told they were heroes and I'm a wizard." He ducked his head and whispered, "If they were so good, why did they want me to be left on the Dursley's doorstep like the morning paper?"

"You know girl, at best Dumbledore is spread too thin because he's not only the Headmaster of Hogwarts, but from what his chocolate frog card said, he's also some high muckety-muck of the wizarding government and has some type of important international position as well. I hate to think that he simply doesn't care about students. He can't be that mean, can he Hedwig? I mean, he's not like Snape." He stopped and looked at Hedwig with widening eyes. "You don't think he lets Snape and Filch do all that so that the blame doesn't come back at him, do you?" He wasn't encouraged by Hedwig's snapping beak.

"While I love learning magic, I wonder what other magic schools teach? Hogwarts seems to be missing half of the important classes. I mean, next term we have Divination, but aren't offered any languages or mathematics. Arithmancy was the closest they have, and it's an optional class only offered third year. How do wizards even balance a family budget without basic math skills?"

Harry's mind was whirling as he thought about Hogwarts. "You know girl, the teachers weren't the ones that saved us from the troll or Quirrelmort or Lockhart or Riddle's diary self that was draining Ginny; we had to save ourselves. Malfoy sends hexes in the halls and I get punished for it. Snape attacks all of us verbally every single class, although he singles me out for 'special' treatment." He looked back down at the newspaper and reread the comments by Roland Standish, the father of one of the students. "Why am I paying to be abused as well as receive a substandard education, Hedwig?"

Thoughts swirled through his mind with lightening speed. Was there another school? Could he apply? Would the Dursleys let him go? Could he afford to pay for it with the gold in his vault? What would Ron and Hermione say? He paused and thought about his best two friends.

"What do you think, girl? Are Ron and Hermione enough of a reason to stay at Hogwarts? I have to admit that it was brilliant that Ron cared enough to come rescue me last summer. But then at school he wasn't very nice about the parselmouth and Heir of Slytherin fiasco. That hurt a lot. Ron is a hot-head, even more so than any of his brothers." Hedwig cooed at him and nibbled his fingers sympathetically. "Hermione stood by me, but is she enough of a reason to stay at Hogwarts?"

He stood up and placed Hedwig back on her cage. "Right then, Hermione always says it helps to make a list when making a big decision. I'll try that." He pulled out a notebook he salvaged from Dudley's wastebasket. His cousin didn't like the color of the cover and threw the empty notebook out in disgust, demanding all red covers from his mother, who simply said "All right, Duddikins. Next time I go to the store I'll get new ones."

Harry took out a pencil stub he also had scavenged and began a list related to all aspects of his life at home and at school.

Dursleys

1. Cupboard under the stairs
2. Scraps for food
3. Forced to work long days
4. Regularly called worthless, useless, ungrateful and a freak
5. Told my parents were drunks and died in a car crash
6. Punished for things Dudley did
7. Why was there no one from Children's Services checking on him from either the Muggle or Wizarding World?

Hogwarts

1. Hogwarts Letter was addressed to the Cupboard Under the Stairs, so why didn't anyone care?
2. No introduction to the Magical world, its customs, traditions or etiquette; why not at least add a book to the First Year book list?
3. No information on how to get to Hogwarts Express platform at the train station
4. Teaching staff includes an abusive Potions professor, a ghost who only taught about goblin rebellions and a caretaker who hates children
5. Missing Classes – there are no languages, mathematics, culture and customs, government, business, politics, arts, or physical education beyond Quidditch
6. Health and Safety – Year 1
 - Possessed teacher, not noticed by the wards, the Headmaster or any of the teachers
 - Headmaster brought the Philosopher's stone wanted by Voldemort into the school – didn't he think it put the students at risk?
 - Twelve foot mountain troll released in the school, not caught by wards.
 - Eleven year olds sent out at night into the Forbidden Forest to find something powerful enough to kill a unicorn which then attacked them
 - A deadly three-headed dog was behind a door that could be opened with a first year unlocking spell.
 - After an eleven year old was forced to kill the possessed Quirrell to save himself, no counseling offered
 - Dumbledore told me in the Infirmary that the Stone was destroyed. If the Flamel's were willing to destroy the stone once Quirellmort came after it, then why was it in Howarts in at all? Why wasn't it

simply destroyed at the beginning of the year rather than risk potential thefts and problems? Did he want to attract a mass murderer to the school? Also, if the Flamels had successfully kept the stone hidden for 600 years, why did they suddenly need a new place to hide it?"

- Dumbledore (deliberately?) hurt and humiliated everyone in one of the four Houses at the Leaving Feast, letting them celebrate their House Cup only to have it taken away in front of the rest of the school by awarding extra points to Gryffindor to let them win. Reinforced house rivalries and increased anger towards non-Slytherins.

- Near death experiences First Year: Troll, First Quidditch match, Quirrell in the forest during detention, Quirrell attempting to get the Stone

7. Health and Safety - Second Year

- Headmaster hired an incompetent DADA instructor who couldn't have passed DADA O.W.L.s

- Riddle's diary made it past the school wards (how?)

- Not a single teacher recognized that a student was possessed

- A basilisk was loose in the schools and the wards/Headmaster didn't know – didn't a single portrait or ghost see the creature?

- A 12-year old girl identified what it was; why didn't any teachers 20-100 years older than her recognize it?

- No consequences when students wrongly identified and persecuted me for being "the Heir of Slytherin"

- Why wasn't the school closed after the first child was petrified? Why did it take a second, third and fourth? Leaving students in what was clearly an extremely dangerous environment that could easily have resulted in many deaths was nothing less than reckless endangerment.

- After fighting and killing a giant basilisk and being bitten by it, killing a version of Voldemort and saving Ginny Weasley, why was I kept in

the Headmaster's office rather than being immediately sent to the Infirmary?

- No counseling offered to Ginny, Ron or me after being attacked by a teacher, fighting a deadly monster, and killing a ghost. Plus I was later attacked by another adult (Malfoy Sr.).

Harry finished scratching his list and shook his head in wonder. He looked over his shoulder at the snowy owl. "It didn't seem so bad when each thing happened individually, but when written down...it's bloody scary, girl." He read over his list again and nodded his head decisively.

"OK, I need to find out if there are other schools available, and hopefully where the education is better, where I wouldn't be nearly killed and where I could trust the adults not to hurt me." Hedwig hooted her approval. "So what do I need? I need to get some time to research other schools, especially those that offer year-round classes or boarding. That means I'll have to get Aunt Petunia's permission to spend time looking into it. If I have to, I'll let her know that I'm aware of Children's Services and that "normal" people don't lock children in cupboards or make them regularly work without food. However, maybe I can be..." he made a face "...Slytherin about it and find a way to phrase it that gets her support without threats."

Hedwig chirped questioningly from her cage top and Harry could swear it sounded like 'Dumbledore'. "The Headmaster? I'll write him after I've already left for another school...but I better visit Gringotts and make sure they don't pay next year's tuition right away."

He continued making a list of everything he needed to do. With any luck, he would get started tomorrow and make progress quickly. The morning was going to mark the start of a new life for Harry Potter.

Harry was up early in the morning and took special care to make a perfect breakfast, not wanting to antagonize his Aunt. After Vernon had left for work and Dudley left to probably terrorize the neighborhood, Harry approached his aunt hesitantly. "Aunt Petunia, may I speak to you for a few minutes?"

He noticed that her thin lips tightened into an even thinner line. Without looking at him she asked frigidly, "About what?"

He took a deep breath and crossed his fingers behind his back. "About getting out of your hair permanently."

At that unexpected comment, her eyes flicked to him. "How do you propose to do that," she spit at him. "Your precious Headmaster made it clear that we had to take you regardless of what we wanted."

The Headmaster? Dumbledore? Why would the Headmaster of Hogwarts tell his aunt what she was to do with her nephew? What right did he have to interfere in Harry's life when he was only a baby, a decade before he was eligible for school? "I'm sorry, Aunt Petunia. I have no idea why he felt he had a right to demand anything from you. It sounds like both of us want to be out from under the Headmaster."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "And how do you propose to do that, boy?"

Harry kept his face and voice polite, "I would like to find a school that holds classes all year. If I can find one, I would stay there and never bother you or Uncle Vernon again."

His Aunt's face lit up at the thought and then her eyes narrowed again. "We were told that your tuition was pre-paid at your current freak school. Vernon and I will not pay for you to attend anywhere else."

Harry felt a brief sense of relief that she wasn't arguing about his attending, but only paying for it. "I wouldn't expect that Aunt Petunia. I will either find a way to transfer my tuition to a year-round school, or I will find one that accepts me as a scholarship student or a work-study student. Either way, I wouldn't expect anything from you or Uncle Vernon, and I would be out of your house for good."

He could see her weighing her fear of Dumbledore against her desire to get him out of the house forever and decided to sweeten the deal. "I just need to go to London one day to gather information on other schools, find those that hold year-round classes and send in my applications. Once I'm gone, I'll send a letter to Hog...err...the freak school letting them know I've transferred. I could include a letter from you that gives your permission for me to attend another school."

She looked at him appraisingly and then glanced down at her magazine again. "Go start on your chores. I will discuss it with Vernon tonight."

Knowing that was the best he could hope for, he started on his chores. Going by his daily list, he stripped the beds and began the laundry. As the first load was running, he vacuumed and dusted the house. After putting the first load in the dryer and starting the next, he cleaned the bathroom, stopping only to re-make the beds with clean linens. From there, he started washing the windows, pausing only when it was time for dinner, being sure to include all of Vernon's favorite side dishes. He stayed out of sight of the man and waited to see what his Aunt would do.

After dinner, Petunia called him into the dining room where Vernon was still sitting. The obese man glared at the young boy, but let his wife speak. "Vernon and I will excuse you from your chores tomorrow to go to where ever you need to go to find out about year-round schools. You'll have to arrange your own transportation though. Apply to as many schools as you need to as quietly as you can. Once you're accepted somewhere else, go there as soon as you can and then let those freaks know you're gone and not coming back."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Aunt Petunia, Uncle Vernon. Shall I write a general note of approval for the transfer for you to sign to include in the applications?" Vernon spoke up from his vantage point, "Write it up, boy, and I'll review it."

"Yes Uncle Vernon," Harry replied meekly. He thought for a moment and then added "Shall I add something to the effect that you will relinquish guardianship to an adult of my choice? That way if a teacher at a new school is willing to accept guardianship, no one can expect you to have anything to do with me again."

Harry was surprised to receive an honest smile from his uncle, the first he remembered ever receiving. "Good thinking, boy! I'll even tell you what. If you can get accepted by another school before the end of the month, I'll give you twenty-five pounds towards your new school uniforms. Make it within the next two weeks, and it will be fifty pounds!" He rubbed his hands together in glee at the prospect of the unwanted teen being gone for good.

Chapter 2 – Forging a New Path

Harry adjusted the cap on his head so that it covered his scar and then walked down the sidewalk looking at the list of bus lines and transfer points from Little Whinging to London. "This will take hours to get me there," he muttered. A shadow fell over the paper in his hand and he paused on the sidewalk as an inquisitive voice asked, "Are you going somewhere, Harry?"

The dark-haired boy hid a sigh and managed to smile up at the eccentric old woman with the grizzled grey hair in front of him. "Good morning, Mrs. Figg. How are you today?" He was surprised to see only one of her many cats slinking near his old baby-sitter's feet. For years, whenever the Dursleys were going to be away, they dropped him off at Mrs. Figg's, where he had to bear the smell of cabbage filling the house as well as the dozens of cats she bred. He supposed it could have been worse; instead of being locked out of the house and working a ten-hour day on yard chores, he was only bored at her house.

The elderly woman smiled benevolently at the polite boy. "I'm fine thank you, Harry. Where are you off to today?"

"I'm heading to the London library today, ma'am" he said courteously. "Aunt Petunia said I could go as long as I got myself there. I'm just trying to make sure I know all of the transfer points and times."

The woman frowned at Harry. "But that will take hours with several transfers." She muttered almost to herself, "who knows what could happen?" She looked at him with troubled eyes as she seemed to have an internal struggle before she finally nodded decisively. "Follow me, Harry. I'll show you the fastest way to London." She turned and began walking down the sidewalk. Harry hesitated, but as it was in the direction he needed to go, he followed her. A movement from the corner of his eye caught his attention and he saw a very large black dog pacing them a dozen yards away, but closer to the houses and hoped it wasn't going to attack Mrs. Figg's cat. He wasn't in the mood to try to rescue a cat from the very large, albeit skinny dog.

At the corner, she turned into a rarely traveled alley. Once she was sure Harry was next to her, she looked both ways and then nodded.

"All right dear, this will do. You're going to take the Knight Bus. All you need to do is hold out your wand hand and think about needing a ride."

Harry turned wide eyes at her. "My..my wand hand?" He stepped back a step and wondered whether this was really Mrs. Figg or someone using Polyjuice. How could she possibly know he had a wand?

The elderly woman sighed heavily. "Yes, Harry. Your wand hand. I know that you're a wizard. My parents were magical, but I'm a Squib."

His eyes widened to impossible dimensions and he knew he was stuttering, but couldn't stop it. "But...but...why 't you ever say ? I came to your house so many times! You could have told me about the wizarding world! Why didn't you say something?" His voice rose in pitch as the words tumbled out.

A wrinkled hand settled on his shoulder and squeezed gently. "I'm sorry, Harry. I really am, but Dumbledore only wanted me to watch you, not reveal anything to you. He said you were too young then. And I'm sorry I made it so boring for you to visit, but if the Dursleys thought you enjoyed visiting me, they wouldn't have let you come over. I had to walk a fine line..." Her voice trailed off in discomfort.

Harry didn't think he could be surprised any more, but was mistaken. "Dumbledore? Headmaster Dumbledore asked you to watch me and not tell me anything about the wizarding world? But why would he want me kept ignorant? Why would he want to deny me my parent's heritage?" He paused and then said quietly, "Wait. You knew the Dursleys...weren't kind to me? Did Dumbledore know?"

"I..." the elderly voice wavered. "I think you need to speak to the Headmaster about that, Harry. Now just hold out your wand hand and think about needing transportation."

Harry swallowed his frustration and questions and thrust out his hand, thinking about how badly he wanted to go to London to find a better school than Hogwarts, especially with this revelation. To his immense surprise, a loud Bang was followed by the appearance of a violently purple triple-decker bus that screeched to a halt beside him.

The words "The Knight Bus" were painted in gold on the front windshield.

The door opened and a purple-clad pimple-faced teenager leapt out. "Welcome to the Knight Bus, emergency transport for the stranded witch or wizard. My name is Stan Shunpike and I will be your conductor today." He looked at the two of them and his face relaxed into a smile. "'ello there Missus Figg! Where are ya off to then?"

The wizened face smiled at the eager young man. "It's not me today, Stan, it's my young neighbor H...err Harold Dursley."

Stan ushered Harry towards the steps, talking as he went. "'ello Harold, come on then. Where ya off to?"

Harry noticed the large black dog looking curiously into the alley and stepped quickly aboard the bus. He waited until the door closed and then said, "I just need to visit Diagon Alley is all. How much for that?"

"Eleven sickles," Stan said promptly. Harry had carefully separated his Muggle money into his left pocket and his wizarding money into the right pocket. He rummaged through the coins until he had eleven sickles counted out into Stan's waiting hand. The youth turned further into the bus and then stopped in surprise at seeing half a dozen brass beds lining the bus aisle, each under a curtained window. "Um...Stan? Where are the seats?"

"Crikey," Stan muttered. He looked at the bus driver, an elderly wizard wearing very thick glasses that distorted his eyes. "Ernie! You forgot to switch to day mode!"

Amidst unintelligible muttering, the driver hit a large purple button and the beds shimmered and then became seats. Harry took the nearest one. As soon as his bottom touched the seat, the bus erupted into motion with another Bang! Harry found himself thrown against the back of the seat with the violence of the movement. He pulled himself up and clung to the side of the seat in desperation as he looked out the front window. They were hurtling down another street, then abruptly mounted the pavement, but somehow didn't hit anything. Instead the objects in their way seemed to jump away to avoid being hit. Harry's stomach churned and rather than thinking

about what he had just learned about Dumbledore, he tried not to think of anything but holding on as the bus lurched its way to London.

Twenty minutes later, Harry stood in front of one of the goblin tellers inside Gringotts. "Excuse me.." Harry looked at the name plate by the goblin, "...Teller Khagun, I have questions about my vault and Gringotts services. With whom should I speak?"

The swarthy face looked up from the ledger he had been scribbling in and ran disinterested eyes over Harry's slight frame before grudgingly setting the quill in its stand. "Do you have your key?"

Harry pulled the small golden key from his right pocket and handed it over. The goblin looked at it closely, and the youth wondered whether the goblins had some way of identifying vault owners through their magical signatures on the key.

"Very well," the Teller said, handing the key back to Harry. "I will see if one of our vault managers can spare a few minutes. Strongjaw!"

A goblin about half a head shorter than Harry came up and waited with his eyes intent on the Teller. "Take....," he paused as if recognizing that Harry wanted privacy, "...this young man to Vault Manager Brastang."

Harry inclined his head to the Teller, as he slipped his key back into his pocket. "Thank you, sir" he said respectfully before hurrying to catch up with the already moving Strongjaw. He would have been surprised to know that the goblin's eyes tracked him until he was out of sight down one of the hallways.

Harry lost count of the number of doors they passed before they stopped at one that looked like every other. Strongjaw rapped his knuckles three times on the door and turned away, hurrying back down the hallway. Harry stopped, not hearing anything from inside, but gathered his Gryffindor courage and turned the handle and stepped into the room.

The room was about the size of the master bedroom in the Dursley household, holding two uncomfortable looking chairs in front of a large wood desk filled with papers, a brass scale, and several folders. Wooden file cabinets lined the wall behind the desk. Perched on a stool, sat an elderly goblin with wisps of white hair

forming a fringe around the base of his skull. Gold wire glasses were perched on a long narrow nose.

Harry closed the door behind him and stepped forward. He bowed slightly and then said "Vault Manager Brastang? Teller Khagun said you would be able to help me with questions about my vault."

The goblin laid the quill down that he was holding and looked at Harry as if analyzing his worth. He waved a hand negligently at a chair. "Sit down, Mr. Potter. What burning questions bring you to Gringotts?"

The dark-haired youth perched on the edge of the hard chair. "Quite a few, actually sir. I was raised by Muggles and don't know much about my vault, Gringotts, or the services the bank offers."

Brastang tipped his head curiously at the polite boy. "Indeed, Mr. Potter. Then please ask your questions."

"Well sir, can you tell me what my vault is worth? I have my key here if you need it." At the goblin's nod, he retrieved and handed over the tiny key. "Oh, and a list of all the deposits and withdrawals that have been made since October 31, 1981, please?"

The goblin opened a box on his desk and placed the key inside and said "Value, contents and history". A quill began moving across a parchment, and a minute later the goblin handed it and the key back to Harry.

"Tell me, Mr. Potter," the goblin began before releasing the parchment, "do you expect to see a major change since the last quarterly statement that was sent two weeks ago?"

Harry dropped his hand from the parchment. "Quarterly statement? I've never had a statement from Gringotts, Mr. Brastang."

Black eyes narrowed at the youth. "Do you have an owl ward around your home, Mr. Potter?"

"Um, I don't think so. Hogwarts sends me my letters, and the Ministry sent me a warning for magic once – although a house elf did it. Oh, and my friends have owled me before."

"Hmph, then either you have a ward specifically against Gringotts or....", he paused and looked appraisingly at the boy. "Tell me, Mr. Potter, have you gotten much mail from those thanking you for You-Know-Who's defeat? Do you receive gifts on your birthday from people you don't know?"

Harry shook his head emphatically, "No sir. The first mail I ever received from the wizarding world was my Hogwarts letter." Harry's whirling thoughts stopped at a memory of Snape mocking him for his fans and his fan mail. The boy had ignored the Potions Master at the time, but as the famous Boy-Who-Lived, wouldn't someone have sent him something? He would have remembered Aunt Petunia or Uncle Vernon screaming about it, but it never happened. Did Dumbledore do something?

Brastang nodded and then waved a hand dismissively. "Then someone warded your property or you specifically to filter mail. They should have included Gringotts though. Now, this shows that since October, 1981, there have been only four withdrawals. Two were transfers in the amount of 2500 galleons each to the Hogwarts vault for your annual tuition. Two others for 100 galleons each were made by you in August last year and the year before. There have been no other transactions other than the annual interest accruals. Your current vault balance is 92,803 galleons."

Harry blinked in surprise. He hadn't expected quite that much. "Can you tell me how much that would be in pounds sterling, sir?"

The goblin sighed and scratched briefly on a scrap of paper before saying, "At today's conversion rate, that would equal 464,015 pounds. That does not include the non-currency contents of the vault. Now, Mr. Potter, what other questions do you have?"

Harry swallowed and said "Do you have branches in other countries? If so, are they connected to this vault or would I have to transfer money if I moved overseas?"

The goblin crossed his arms and a brief smile revealed sharp pointed teeth. "Yes, Gringotts has branches in most wizarding communities. Funds can be transferred almost instantaneously as needed." He wondered where the youth was thinking of going.

Harry nodded and hoped a branch would be local to another school, should he be able to find one. "I would like it kept confidential, but I am considering attending another school, Mr. Brastang. Would you please hold off on transferring the next Hogwarts tuition payment for now? I will let you know whether I will be transferring or not within the next month."

The goblin hid his amusement at hearing the young Boy-Who-Lived might be departing. "We will wait until you tell us the name of the school and the amount of tuition to transfer, Mr. Potter."

"Tell me, are there other methods that will make sure I receive my Gringotts statements regardless of mail wards?"

Brastang kept his face bland and wondered just what was going on in his customer's life that he had to go out of his way to be kept informed of his own gold. It grated on his honor as a Vault Manager that someone would prevent Gringotts information from being received by a customer. He took a small breath and inclined his head. "Yes, Mr. Potter. You could rent a two-way mail box at any public mail service. There is one a block south of Gringotts." He raised an eyebrow at the boy. "Is there anything else I can do for you today?"

Harry shook his head and stood and then stopped. "Oh, yes one more thing sir. Do you have a list of services that Gringotts provides to customers? I mean things for a fee?"

Brastang opened a drawer and withdrew a folded parchment. "Indeed, Mr. Potter. Gringotts provides a variety of services, from renting conference rooms, to executing wills, to managing accounts. In our non-financial areas, we will provide the services of curse-breakers, warders and even body guards upon occasion. This pamphlet will explain the basics and give you a contact for additional information."

Harry accepted the pamphlet and smiled gratefully at the elderly goblin. "Thank you, Mr. Brastang. You've been great and very patient. I appreciate your time." He turned and left the office, stopping to smile and incline his head once more before closing it behind him.

"Very interesting," the elderly Vault Manager muttered as he made several notes on the meeting, "very interesting indeed."

The sun indicated it was still morning as Harry left Gringotts and headed south looking for the public mail service. Five buildings later, a sign of an owl with a letter tied to its leg indicated he had found it with "Grover Stillman, Proprietor" under it.

"Welcome, young man," said a cheery voice as Harry opened the door. "Come in, come in. I'll be with you in just a moment." The speaker behind the counter was a chubby middle-aged man with warm brown eyes and a ready smile.

The front of the shop had empty boxes, writing supplies and owl treats. Behind the counter, were two doors with the right door opened to the back that revealed an owlery with several dozen birds, not all owls, resting on perches. He watched the man launch the owl on his arm upwards and realized there must be an opening in the roof for the birds to exit.

The man came back to the front of the room, removing a heavy glove as he walked. He smiled cheerfully at Harry and asked, "Now then, young man, what can I do for you today?"

Harry couldn't help but return the smile. "Would you tell me about your services, please Mr. Stillman?"

Interest sparkled in the warm brown eyes, but the rotund man only nodded and didn't ask questions. "Such a polite young man! We have a number of services that we offer. You can rent an owl for a one-time delivery; you can subscribe to a service that redirects all of your mail here first to be filtered for hexes, curses, jinxes and the like before being delivered to your location. For customers who spend a lot of time overseas, we offer a two-way mail box that provides instant deliveries. Much easier on the owls, don't you know. We also provide packing and cushioning charms for those delicate deliveries."

Brastang was right about the mail boxes then. "How does the two-way mail box work, sir?"

"You receive a charmed box that is the mate to one kept here. One section is where you place mail to be delivered and another is for

where you will receive incoming mail. The mail comes here first and is placed in your box. The box operates similarly to a port key in that your mail is transmitted magically from the box on our end to yours almost instantly. For a slight upcharge, the box will expand automatically to accommodate the size of any package being sent or delivered."

Harry grinned at the man, pleased with the idea. "And security, sir? Will anyone be able to get at my incoming or outgoing mail? Or track it?" He didn't want to think that the Headmaster would try to access his mail, but wanted to be certain it was secure.

Stillman chuckled at the dark-haired youth. "Oh, you're a suspicious one, aren't you? Each box is charmed for security. It would take a skilled curse-breaker to break those charms, and the shop wards would alert the Aurors before their spells would take effect. As far as tracking mail, that is one of the filters we provide if you subscribe to that service."

"That's brilliant, Mr. Stillman! I would like to rent one of those boxes, plus have all mail checked for hexes, tracking charms and the like before it's sent on to me. How much would that be, please?"

The cheery smiled dimmed a bit. "Well, young man, that's the rub. It will be expensive. The mail box is 30 galleons a year, including the mail redirection charm; with the expansion charm to allow any size package, it's 45 galleons. The subscription to filter all of your incoming mail for hexes, curses, jinxes and tracking charms runs another 15 galleons. Usually only businessmen are interested in those services."

Harry grinned at the man again and began counting out galleons. "So 60 galleons? It's worth every knut, sir."

Stillman blinked in surprise as the pile of galleons grew on the counter. The youth wasn't dressed like the son of a wealthy family, but he wasn't about to question a new customer. He drew a contract out from a drawer under the counter. "All right then, lad, I'll need you to check off the services you want, sign at the bottom and then I'll apply the redirection charm on you."

The man was surprised at the boy's slight hesitation before he signed the parchment and then pushed it back across the counter.

His eyes widened slightly at the name and his smile returned. "Of course, Mr. Potter, now I understand your desire for privacy." He drew his wand and added, "Just stand still a moment for the redirection charm."

Stillman cast the family's custom charm on the boy and then frowned as a red glow surrounded the slim body. "Now that's odd, the charm didn't take." He cast an identifying spell at the boy. "Hmm, are you aware that there is a mail ward on you?" He waved his wand again in an intricate pattern and words appeared above the boy's head. "It only allows mail from Hogwarts, the Ministry, and those you recognize as friends." He looked at Harry, who had closed his eyes and had a look of irritation.

"Bloody hell," he thought to himself, "who but Dumbledore would have done this? He's the one that dropped me off at the Dursleys. He's the one who keeps sending me back there. He's the one that sent Mrs. Figg and told her not to tell me about the wizarding world. I'll bet he placed the ward as well." He opened his eyes and met the curious and slightly worried eyes of the proprietor. "Would you please remove the ward, sir, and then replace it with your charm?"

"Of course, Mr. Potter." The chubby man cast again and then frowned as the spell resisted him. "Tricky caster, hmm? But I bet you didn't think of this." He opened another drawer under his desk and rummaged around until he pulled out an amethyst-colored ball. At Harry's questioning look, he added "This is a focusing crystal. They're not used that often as they have to be specially attuned to the caster, but it strengthens the spell being cast." He held recast the spell and Harry felt a tingle across his body and couldn't help but grin at the man's look of satisfaction as he muttered "Got'cha!" A second spell was cast, and Harry only felt a warm glow that was quickly absorbed.

"There you go, Mr. Potter," the pleased man said. "Now I'll be right back with your box." He opened the door on the left and Harry could see rows of shelves filled with various supplies. The proprietor selected a box and returned quickly to Harry. "This is a nice box made of Alder wood; the color will deepen to a pale red as it ages. Very durable." He cast another spell, touching both Harry and the box, both of which had a brief golden glow. "And now your mail charm is tied to this particular box. Its mate will be here, and no one

will be the wiser." He winked cheerfully at the young celebrity, pleased to provide this service.

Harry opened his backpack and carefully stored the mail box. "Thank you, Mr. Stillman! How will we renew this if I'm overseas?"

"Just send me a note indicating your desire to renew the contract and include the number to your vault. As long as we have an approved contract, I'll be able to deduct the fee directly." He was rewarded with another radiant smile as Harry said "Brilliant!"

After leaving Mr. Stillman, Harry headed to Flourish and Blotts. He made sure to keep his forehead covered with the cap to avoid unwanted notice. He received an odd look or two for the obviously Muggle cap, but ignored them. Once in the book store, he browsed the shelves, looking for anything that might be helpful.

In one section of the store, he found several books on Wizarding customs and traditions as well as Wizarding law with a focus on children. He browsed through the books and in one on Wizarding customs he found mention of schooling options. Some families chose to home school their children, while others preferred small schools that have more one-on-one teaching versus the larger schools like Hogwarts, Beauxbatons or Durmstrang. The bibliography points to several books on magical education, which he quickly sought out.

Leaning against one of the book cases away from the clerks and other customers, Harry skimmed through the schooling options. He certainly didn't want to be tutored at home; that simply wasn't feasible with the Dursleys and their hatred of all things magical. He found a section on Hogwarts and was surprised to discover that it was part of a triumvirate coalition with a school in France called Beauxbatons and one in northern Norway called Durmstrang. These schools coordinated their classes and standards, and kept close ties.

"Not going to happen," he muttered. "I don't want to attend a school that is closely linked with Hogwarts." He flipped the page and found references to other schools that were not guided by the three older schools. His interest picking up, Harry eagerly searched through the information listed about the other options. He was delighted to find detailed information about multiple schools.

He was about to delve into the information when he heard a throat cleared behind him. With a small jump, he turned to find a clerk looking at him suspiciously. "Can I help you," she asked.

Harry gave a small smile. "I think I've found what I need, thank you. I'll be taking these." He brought the small stack of books to the counter and paid quickly, then placed the books into his backpack. "Excuse me, ma'am. Would you please cast a featherlight spell that will last until I get home?" Since he had proven to be a paying customer, she cast the charm as requested.

It was now noon, so Harry stopped at the Leaky Cauldron for a quick meal. The daily special was a hearty Shepherd's Pie. Considering he had only had a slice of leftover toast for breakfast, he filled up on the substantial meal, not certain whether he would have another meal that day.

Harry decided to take the Muggle buses back to Little Whinging as the trip would give him enough time to read about the other schools. He figured that even if his Aunt had given him a day off chores, if he came back too soon he would be put to work. Better to ride several buses for a couple of hours to begin his research.

"I think I want a school in another country," he thought to himself as he pulled his first book out of the backpack. "Preferably a school without any ties to Hogwarts or even Britain, so that I can't be forced back. I wonder if there are translation spells if I have to go to a non-English speaking country. Hermione will probably know." He stopped himself from thinking that. "No, I have to do all the research myself."

By the time he had made his first transfer to another bus, he had pulled a notebook and pencil from his backpack and was spread out across the back of the bus making notes. He was amazed at the information about the schools that was contained in the books, including the school rules, the background of the teaching staff and their qualifications, the curriculum and testing standards, as well as information about the physical buildings and grounds. "I wonder why they never gave us any of this information before we first came to Hogwarts," he muttered to himself.

The first school that drew his interest was Monaci Bianchi Academia in the Tremiti Islands of Italy. The academic classes seemed well

balanced and rounded, but many of the mandatory classes implied that this was a finishing school for the elite who planned political careers. "Ballroom Etiquette? There's a term-long class on Ballroom Etiquette?" He shuddered slightly.

The next interesting school was the O'n Academy in Alexandria, Egypt. This school had an interesting range of topics, including Archaeology, Warding, Curse Identification and Counters, Healing, as well as one they called "Survival Skills" in addition to the core classes he took at Hogwarts. Harry was drawn to the idea of sunshine and Archaeology. Unfortunately, they only offered ten month sessions, which would still require that he spend two months back with the Dursleys or find other accommodations. Even with that drawback, he marked the school with a star.

An Asian school was available in Hong Kong named Tang Fu Hsieh. This school did provide year round classes, but had only limited Muggle classes, specifically History and World Events. They had an interesting series of classes on Warding, but few other additions. They also had the most numerous rules and emphasized strict adherence to them.

Magic and Spellcrafting Lyceum in Crete, Greece appealed strongly to him. Harry liked that they offered an entire study program on spell crafting and creating new spells. That especially fascinated him as did their focus on Enchanting. The rest of their curriculum also looked comprehensive from a magical perspective, but lacked any Muggle classes. Unfortunately, they had a ten-week hiatus during the summer months. However, he liked everything he read about the staff, campus, and curriculum, so marked it with another star.

Finally, there were two schools in the United States that drew his attention. First was the Institute of Magical Crafts in Salem, Massachusetts which offered a rich variety of both magical and non-magical classes. The non-magical classes included Art, Biology, Computer Science, Languages (French, German, Spanish and Japanese), Government, and Physical Education (described as a rounded inclusion of archery, gymnastics, self-defense, and soccer), as well as Warding. Unfortunately, they did not have a year-round program available. The information clearly stated that summer classes were independent study away from the campus. He marked it with another star for the curriculum and wondered what other housing options he could find for someone his age.

The final school was the St. Croix Academy for Magic and Science in Stillwater, Minnesota. This Academy looked interesting, especially as they offered a blend of "traditional non-magical" courses as well as magical training. Besides the core Hogwarts classes of Astronomy, Defense against the Dark Arts (called Battle Magics there), Charms, History, Herbology/Botany, Potions and Transfiguration, they also offered Ancient Runes, Art, Business, Biology, Chemistry, Computer Science, Healing, Languages, Mathematics, Magical Creatures, Magical Culture and Customs, Magical Government and Law, Music, Physical Education, Spellcrafting and Warding.

He was also surprised to see a number of one-day courses including "Writing Essays and Research Papers", "Career Opportunities", "Introduction to a Non-Magical Culture", "Introduction to a Magical Culture", "Introduction to Computers", "Magical and Non-Magical Careers" and "Resume Writing and Interviewing". Turning the page, he found independent study courses such as "Estate Management", "Financial Planning for Individuals" and "Investments". His eyes opened wide as he read that seats were limited for the summer classes, and students staying on campus for the summer had the first opportunity to select those courses. He quickly drew a series of stars around this school.

Looking at the listed school rules, they were all common sense and not terribly restrictive. Owls and familiars were allowed to students, as long as the familiars were well-behaved and house-trained. Beyond the secondary school certification, they also offered Mastery courses. Year-round tuition and board was 2,750 galleons or \$13,750 USD.

He turned to the staff information. The Principal, which he supposed was like the Headmaster, was Victoria Graham, a septuagenarian with Masters in Charms and Warding, including several patented procedures. The Vice-Principal was 48 year old Michael Talbot, who held Masters in Battle Magics and Transfiguration, as well as a non-magical Masters of Education. Looking at the rest of the staff, he noticed that all of them held at least one Mastery, either in a magical or non-magical field. He was surprised to see that the staff contained two vampires; one married with her blood supplied by her spouse; the other was identified as receiving blood through certified donors; both were under magical oaths not to harm others unless

attacked first. Odd, none of the other staff members had their race identified.

By the time he reached Privet Drive, he was ready to apply to St. Croix Academy as his first choice, but would also apply to O'n Academy as well as Magic and Spellcrafting Lyceum and the Institute of Magical Crafts if he wasn't accepted to St. Croix. If he couldn't get into St. Croix Academy, he would have to find another option for the summer breaks and hope that no one demanded that he return to England for the summers.

He arrived home only a few minutes after Vernon did. He noticed the black dog across the street again, and wondered if it was a stray, but shrugged and went into the house. "Well boy," his uncle demanded, "what did you find today?"

Harry allowed himself a cautious smile of success. "It was a very productive day, Uncle Vernon." He opened his backpack and showed him the number of books he had brought home. "I found several schools out of the country and am going to write and send out applications tonight."

A brief smile flickered across the corpulent man's face. "Good, see that you do, boy." The man turned to his wife and smiled as he rubbed his hands together. "Pretty soon, Pet. We're going to be rid of him pretty soon!"

The dark-haired boy hid the hurt that once again rose up in him. He turned and quietly climbed the stairs and shut the door. He heard rustling in Hedwig's cage and uncovered it, then let opened the door and waited for the bird to climb up on his hand. He drew her out and stroked her soft feathers. "I would rather be alone in a strange country than stay here and be despised" he said despondently. The snowy owl nibbled his fingers affectionately and he found comfort in her unfaltering devotion.

"Well, what do you think, girl? Shall I send in an application to St. Croix Academy?" At her positive nod and click of her beak, he smiled and moved to his wobbly second-hand desk and withdrew parchment and his favorite purchase of the day; a steel tipped never-ink quill.

Hedwig chuffed softly as he crumpled yet another parchment. It took eight attempts before he was satisfied with his letter to St. Croix Academy.

St. Croix Academy

To the Attention of Principal Victoria Graham

Stillwater, Minnesota

U.S.A.

Dear Principal Graham,

My name is Harry Potter. I am approaching my 13th birthday and have completed two years at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. While Hogwarts has a long history in Britain, I find myself wanting a school with a more diverse curriculum that satisfies not only my wizarding half, but my non-magical half as well. St. Croix Academy offers the range of courses that I seek, so I am writing to request that you accept this letter as a formal application to attend the school.

I should say in advance that I am unfortunately a local celebrity because I survived the Avada Kedavra curse as a toddler. The fact that it was something my Mother did to protect me before her death seems irrelevant to those that choose to make me a public figure. I do not enjoy being in the public eye and would be happy to attend St. Croix Academy under another name or use any method to help ensure both my and the school's privacy.

I am enclosing a letter from my guardian, Mrs. Petunia Dursley, giving her approval for me to transfer to another school.

If you accept me as a student, are you able to provide a port key to your location? That would simplify the transfer process enormously.

Thank you for your consideration,

Harry James Potter

He signed his name and then folded one of the transfer approval notes that his Aunt signed inside that letter. As he folded and sealed

the parchment, Hedwig jumped down and held out her leg for the letter. Harry stroked her head and said apologetically, "I'm sorry girl, but this one is going overseas and I can't bear to be without you that long. I have a box that will send the letter. OK?"

He could have sworn Hedwig actually growled at him, but when he reiterated it would likely take her a week to get there and another to get back, she finally seemed to forgive him. He placed the letter in the outgoing portion of the box and was surprised to see an immediate flash as it disappeared. "Now that's good service" he grinned to himself.

Harry decided to wait to see whether he was accepted by St. Croix before writing to any of the other schools. He went to bed that night hoping it wouldn't take more than a couple of days to hear back.

The Dursleys were unexpectedly nice, at least for them, the following morning. When Vernon heard that Harry was waiting for a response from an overseas school, he permitted his nephew an egg, rasher of bacon and a slice of toast for breakfast. He even limited his chores to mowing the grass and weeding the flower beds. "You'll need time to work on those applications and pack your things," he said with a large smile.

After his chores were completed, Harry spent the afternoon working on applications to the other schools, but held off sending them. He truly hoped he could enter the year-round St. Croix Academy. He checked the mail box frequently, but had to go to bed with no response.

When he awoke the following morning, he was delighted to see that mail box was glowing, apparently to indicate new mail had arrived. He opened the incoming mail side and eagerly withdrew a letter with the St. Croix Academy seal. He took a deep breath and opened the envelope and unfolded the letter.

Dear Mr. Potter,

Thank you for your interest in St. Croix Academy. Our summer session is currently in progress, but you are granted provisional acceptance for the next term beginning August 23rd. Your final acceptance is based on passing your entrance exams with satisfactory grades.

We appreciate your desire to attend the school anonymously, but recommend that you continue to use your actual name. Not only will that make record keeping less complicated, but you will be pleased to learn that your reputation will not promote the same degree of interest in the United States.

This letter may be used as a port key to St. Croix Academy, although you will still be required to register as a student with International Customs. To activate the port key, touch everything that you want to transport with you and say "Portus St. Croix Academy". The school is six hours behind Greenwich, England or GMT -6. Please adjust your departure accordingly.

Sincerely,

Victoria Graham

Principal, St. Croix Academy

Chapter 3 – St. Croix Academy

Harry made sure that the fifty pounds from his uncle was securely stored in his trunk, along with the letters signed by his Aunt approving the change of guardianship. He was neatly dressed in the trousers and white shirt of his Hogwarts uniform, but left the robe in his trunk since it carried the Gryffindor crest. He sat on the closed trunk and held Hedwig's cage on his lap. After taking a deep breath and trying to calm his racing heart, he said clearly "Portus St. Croix Academy".

He felt a jerking sensation starting behind his navel and the world suddenly twisted and rolled. He barely kept his seat on his trunk as everything stopped turning. He took several deep breaths and opened his eyes. "Are you OK, Hedwig?" he asked in concern. A noisy irritated clack of her beak confirmed that she had survived the transportation.

Harry looked around the bland cream colored room he found himself in. It was small and windowless, but brightly lit from an unseen source. A single wooden door was on the left wall, while a sign on the wall in front of him stated "St. Croix Apparation Point". Below that, another sign read "Students please wait for a guide before exiting". He heard a faint hum as he simultaneously felt a slight tickle across his skin, and then all was quiet. Unknown to him, in an office far away in Scotland, several machines gave off an alarm to an empty office.

As he waited, his racing heart began to slow down a little. What a day! He remembered his announcement to his relatives.

His Aunt woke him with a sharp rap on the door as usual. He dressed hurriedly and walked quietly down the stairs, being careful not to disturb Dudley. He pulled out the pans and began to fry a pound of bacon in one pan. Then he peeled and sliced several potatoes and started frying them in another pan. He had just finished eggs and toast as his Aunt and Uncle entered the kitchen, followed shortly by Dudley's thunderous footsteps down the stairs.

Harry carried the food to the table and placed it carefully, avoiding the foot his cousin had stuck out to trip him. Once his relatives had filled their plates, he said "I have good news. I was accepted at an

overseas school that offers year-round boarding. I can leave today if that's OK."

Vernon stopped chewing and stared at the dark-haired boy before a wide smile split his face. He swallowed and then said "Excellent news, boy, excellent! You go ahead and pack up your things. What time are you leaving?"

Harry shoved the lingering sadness at his relatives' callousness to the back corner of his mind and locked it away. "This afternoon, Uncle Vernon. I will probably be gone before you get home tonight." He paused and then added in an innocent tone, "Unless you need me to stay so that you can go to the bank today for the fifty pounds?"

His Uncle's eyes narrowed, but then he shook his head. "Well worth it," he muttered to himself. He drew out his wallet and counted out fifty pounds. "Take it and be gone before I get home today, boy."

Dudley's eyes widened at the bills and he tried to grab them, but Vernon slid them over to Harry. "Dad," he whined, "I want fifty pounds too! I need spending money for movies, and sodas and games and spending time with Piers and the guys! Give me sixty pounds, Dad! I deserve more than the freak!"

Vernon smiled fondly at his son. "And so you do, Dudley. I'll stop at the bank over lunch and get you sixty pounds for your summer spending money."

Dudley began scowling so Petunia said hastily, "I'll go, Vernon. No need for Diddums to wait, until you get home tonight."

Vernon smiled jovially, "Quite right, Pet." He turned to Dudley and said, "There you go, son. Your mother will go this morning for your spending money."

Not another word was said to Harry. There were no goodbyes.

His musing was interrupted as the door opened on the wall to the left of him revealing a tall lean man with auburn hair and green eyes that framed a thin face accentuated by high cheekbones. Harry could see that his hair was tied with a band at the base of his neck.

He was dressed in a light brown sport coat, pale yellow shirt and dark brown trousers.

"Good morning, you must be Harry Potter", he said in a warm voice. "I'm Michael Talbot, the Vice Principal of St. Croix Academy. Welcome." He held out his hand for Harry to shake.

Harry smiled back at the man and quickly put down Hedwig's cage to shake hands. "Yes sir, I'm Harry."

Talbot leaned over to look at Hedwig. "And who is this charming owl?"

Hedwig puffed up and looked pleased as Harry grinned. "This is Hedwig. She's my best friend."

"Well, she's a lovely young lady," Talbot smiled. "This is our apparition point, just outside of the school wards, but it is also charmed to register your magical signature as an international visitor. We'll have you sign a form indicating that you're a student once you pass your entrance exams." He flicked his wand at Harry's trunk and levitated it. "Let's go up to the school and we can talk on the way."

As they exited the building, Harry had the impression of deep green grass, wildflowers and meadows. A few yards away, the image faded and an attractive landscaped campus with multiple buildings came into view. "As you likely read, St. Croix Academy was founded in 1899 and resides on 80 acres that the non-magical population perceives as a dairy farm. The closest community is the town of Stillwater, but we're also just 20 miles from St. Paul. We have the advantage of being near both a large metropolitan area with the peacefulness of a small town experience. Weekend visits to Stillwater are permitted, but you must maintain a non-magical wardrobe and must not go alone until you are in the tenth grade. There is one block there dedicated to magical shops that are warded to be ignored by non-magical residents."

"I notice that you say non-magical rather than Muggle, sir," said Harry as he carried Hedwig's cage.

"Ah yes, you're from the Old World culture. I had almost forgotten. You'll see quite a difference between what you're used to and how we operate. Firstly, Muggle isn't a politically correct term, meaning

some people find it offensive. We use 'non-magical' and 'magical', although there is a movement to make it 'normal' and 'magical' from some of our non-magical families. You'll also find that we blend technology with magic."

"I didn't think that was possible, sir" exclaimed Harry. "Electronic devices don't work at Hogwarts."

Talbot smiled at the youth. "Normal devices do fail in a heavy magical environment, but special shielding for some items or even total redesigns make them work. For example, personal computers and the Internet are becoming quite popular and we want our students ready for the future, so we've set up a computer lab in one of the specially shielded buildings on campus. All of our students are required to take an "Introduction to Computing" class. We also accept homework assignments written on the computer, a typewriter as well as hand-written."

Harry was ecstatic, "You don't require quills and parchment? That's brilliant! I really struggled at Hogwarts trying to learn to write with a quill."

Talbot smiled warmly at the boy's enthusiasm. "No quills here," he confirmed. "You may use pens and pencils as appropriate. We also use normal notebooks. The central magical bookstore in Stillwater maintains a branch store on campus where you can purchase textbooks and basic supplies."

They followed a trail made of earth tone colored pavers and Talbot pointed out a gymnasium as they passed. "Phys Ed Classes are from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM, but the building opens at 6:00 AM. There is an indoor track, a swimming pool and a weight room that many students like to use during off-hours. PE classes are mandatory for all grades; and each year, time is spent on volleyball, basketball, track, gymnastics, weight training, self-defense, swimming and diving and soccer. We don't have a football program, although you're not from the U.S. so probably wouldn't be interested. We do offer Quidditch, but only during Fall and Spring. Winters in Minnesota are much too cold for flying. Our Sports teams are divided by age and skill and play against themselves and other schools, depending on interest and participation." Harry noticed that the students entering the building weren't wearing robes and

wondered again about the school dress code, which hadn't been mentioned in the book he had read.

Talbot pointed to a large brick building to their left, framed by students sitting on the grass around the building enjoying the warm sunshine. "That is the library. We're proud of the fact that it is one of the largest combined magical and non-magical libraries in a six state area. There is plenty of room to do your homework there, as well as areas set aside specifically for study groups."

They approached a large white two-story structure that looked like a southern colonial mansion. A porch wrapped around the front of the home on both floors, supported by graceful white columns. "This was the original site of the school, built in the 1890's," explained the Vice Principal. "We call it Blair House after Augustus Blair, the first Principal of the school. Today it houses our seventh, eighth and ninth graders. Tenth, eleventh and twelfth graders share another building. Students who are studying for Masters that reside on campus have another building."

He opened the double doors and led Harry into a large foyer warmed with hardwood floors and light moss green walls. "The main floor includes a large common room, a small library with basic study materials, a warded practice room for spell-casting, the dining room, a staff member office and two bathrooms. The kitchen is downstairs along with the house elf rooms and storage. There is also an underground tunnel to the library and the main magical training building." At Harry's surprised look, he added "Minnesota winters come with a number of snowstorms, so the tunnels are primarily used then." He grinned and added, "We don't want to lose anyone in a snow bank and only find them come the spring thaw!"

He led Harry up the stairs continuing, "Upstairs are the bedrooms. Each student shares a room and a bathroom with one other student. Each student residence has at least one adult Residence supervisor, although we currently have married couples in two of the three residences. Your Residence supervisor is our Healing instructor, Ms. Sadler." He pointed out the name plate on the first door with "Ms. Christine Sadler".

Mid way down the hall, he stopped at a door that listed Elias Guerrero and Harry Potter as the residents. "Place your hand on the door please and I'll imprint your magical signature. Only those

imprinted can enter the room if the door is locked, besides staff." Harry laid his hand on the door and Talbot cast a spell to add him to the door's security. Once that was done, he nodded and Harry opened the door.

Like the rest of the building, the floors were hardwood. Two single beds were on opposing walls with large wardrobes across from their respective beds. A nightstand was on one side of each bed, while a desk with three drawers flanked the other side of the bed. A window was on the wall between the two beds and a door was on the side wall nearest to the far bed.

The far bed was obviously already claimed by a student as it was covered in a brightly colored bedspread of deep yellow with red and bright blue. A large blue rug with accents in orange, lime green and buttery yellow covered most of his roommate's space. A poster on the wall above the bed was looking down at a city of brightly colored buildings. The desk was filled with books as were the shelves above it. All said, it looked like his roommate definitely enjoyed bold colors.

"Your roommate is Elias Guerrero, who has been with us since he started seventh grade. He's on a camping trip with his family this week, but will be back soon." He levitated Harry's trunk to the unoccupied side of the room.

"You each have your own wardrobe but have to share the bath. You may transfigure your bedspread and rug however you want, and you may put up artwork on your side of the room as long as it's not offensive. Why don't you get unpacked and changed, and I'll be back to bring you down to lunch. Ms. Sadler will be back by then as well, so you'll be able to meet her and she'll introduce you to the others staying over the summer. Then we'll schedule your entrance exams. Oh, your health check is also scheduled for this afternoon."

Harry turned around from the desk where he had moved to place Hedwig's cage. "Health check, sir?"

"Every student is given a mandatory health exam. It only takes about twenty minutes and gives the Healer a baseline if you need his services in the future."

He paused at the threshold of the room and smiled kindly at the boy. "I'll be back in an hour to take you to lunch. And Harry, welcome to

St. Croix Academy." He closed the door behind him and silence reigned in the room.

Harry sat down heavily on the bed and shook his head. "Merlin's moldy beard, Hedwig! My head is whirling and I still have so many questions! What about uniforms and robes? What type of entrance exam will I have to take? Do I need to study first? What if I fail my exams?" Hedwig ruffled her feathers and clicked her beak at him as if to tell him to calm down. "Should I even unpack my things? I only have Dudley's hand-me-downs and my school uniform." He thought about it and decided to only unpack his grooming kit and broom.

He brought the kit into the bathroom and grinned in pleasure. "Wicked!" The room contained a double vanity, so that he and his roommate wouldn't have to fight over the sink. Across from the sink, was a combined shower and tub. One set of drawers was already filled, so he unpacked his kit in the drawers by the other sink.

Back in his room, he transfigured his bedspread into gold with red accents and his rug into red with gold accents. The Gryffindor colors coordinated with his roommates colorful choices and made him feel a little more at home.

He unpacked food for Hedwig and then filled her water cup from a faucet in the bathroom. "I'll have to find out if there's an owlery, girl. In the meantime, I'll leave the window open so that you can come and go as you please." She jumped to his shoulder and nuzzled his cheek before hopping to the window and soaring outside.

Harry lay down on the bed to test it out and was surprised at how open it felt without the curtains the four poster beds had at Hogwarts. The mattress was extremely comfortable...

He had almost dozed off when Harry heard a knock at the door. He quickly got up, made a brief attempt to smooth his hair and opened the door.

"Hello again, Harry. How are you settling in?" Michael Talbot smiled at the colored bedspread and rug. "Nice transfiguration work, and I'm sure Elias will approve of the colors." He gestured down the hall and added, "Shall we head to lunch? Are you hungry?"

"Yes sir, "Harry said obediently. He wondered what the meals would be like at St. Croix, plus it had been a long time since he had breakfast, so he would welcome anything.

The Vice Principal led him down to the dining room, where there were over a dozen round tables with eight chairs around each table. Wainscoting lined the bottom of the walls, while the upper portions of the walls were a yellow cream. A wall of floor to ceiling windows showed the manicured lawns and shrubs outside. Harry noticed that only three of the tables were populated with students around his age, all dressed in casual clothes without a robe in sight. Talbot led him to a table with a woman in her late thirties or early forties and two other students.

He laid a hand on Harry's shoulder and said, "Please welcome Harry Potter to St. Croix Academy. Harry just arrived today and is transferring from England. Harry, this is Ms. Sadler. She teaches Healing and is your House supervisor." He pulled out two chairs and gestured for Harry to take one as he seated himself.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Ms. Sadler," Harry said politely before taking his seat. He wondered if the teachers here didn't use titles like "Professor". He was surprised to notice that the table setting only had cloth napkins with flatware rolled into them and no plates.

Ms. Sadler gave him a warm smile. "Welcome to St. Croix Academy, Harry. We're pleased that you could join us." She gestured to the two other boys at the table. "This is Hugh Porter and Richard Lovell. They're both going into ninth grade this year as well."

The first boy, Hugh, was heavy with light brown skin and a round, bland face. He had long wavy light brown hair and warm hazel eyes that looked at the new student with interest. "Hi Harry. Nice to meet you."

The second boy stood to shake hands, revealing that he was taller than Harry. He was pale-skinned with a square-jawed face, straight brown hair and blue-grey eyes. He gripped Harry's hand and pumped twice before releasing it. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance. I go by Rich rather than Richard," he said rather officiously.

As Harry and the Vice Principal sat down, cards appeared in front of them. Harry picked it up and noticed that it was divided into sandwiches, meals, salads, soups, vegetables, fruits and drinks. Talbot leaned over to say "You tap your wand on the selections you want and then lay it back down. Your meal will appear. If you have special dietary needs, we'll fill out a form to let the kitchen know and only choices from those requirements will be offered."

Harry decided that he was hungry enough for a full meal and tapped the grilled chicken, mashed potatoes, salad and ice water. He laid the card down and a salad immediately appeared with small bottles of oil and vinegar.

After he had eaten a couple of bites, Ms. Sadler asked, "Are you finding this different than your previous school?"

He touched his napkin to his mouth and said, "Yes, Ma'am. Hogwarts is a castle in Scotland. All of the classes are inside it except for Care of Magical Creatures and Herbology, and all of the students stay in the castle. We were divided into four Houses though, named after the four Founders."

"What was the purpose of the Houses, then" asked Rich.

"The House was supposed to be your family for the seven years of schooling. You won or lost points for your House and the one with the most points at the end of the year won a House Cup."

He took another bite of salad as Hugh asked curiously "How would you win or lose points?"

"If you answered questions correctly in class, or was the first one to master a spell, the professor awarded points to your House. If you broke a rule or the Professor didn't like you, you lost points for the House."

Ms. Sadler raised an eyebrow. "If your Professor didn't like you, you lost points?"

"Well, there was really only one like that," Harry admitted. "He took points not only for rules violations, but also if you got a question wrong, or didn't prevent someone nearby from causing an accident, for breathing too loudly..." He shook his head and pushed the salad

plate away, which was then replaced with a plate containing a grilled boneless chicken breast and mashed potatoes.

"It would appear to me that a system of that type would cause a rivalry between the Houses and discourage cooperation" said Rich pompously.

Harry took a bite of his chicken and swallowed before saying shortly, "It did." He turned to the Vice Principal and said, "I read that violating the rules here is met with detention, and that three detentions in the same term could result in a suspension." At Talbot's nod he asked, "How are the detentions served?"

The Vice Principal took a sip of his tea and set the cup down before answering. "Detentions are served in a quiet room with no interaction with other students. Depending on the infraction, you might be assigned additional homework that will not count towards your grade, or you might be sent to stand in a corner with no talking or other interaction."

"Stand in a corner? For students our age?" Harry shuddered and thought he would prefer to wash out Snape's cauldrons than stand in a corner like a baby.

Ms. Sadler chuckled at Harry's exclamation while the other two boys nodded in agreement. "The purpose of the detention is to make sure you don't repeat the behavior. Standing in the corner seems to do that. I usually request an essay on why the rule exists, why violating it was wrong, and how they would act differently in the future. I start them at one-thousand words, but add a thousand words for every additional time the same rule is broken"

Harry shuddered at the idea of a several thousand word essay and was glad the rules at St. Croix Academy were pretty reasonable.

Once lunch was finished, Mr. Talbot led him to another building. This housed the Healing classes, Ms. Sadler's office, and the Clinic. As they entered the Clinic the Vice-Principal explained, "Outside of the summer, student healers staff the reception area. They get the information of what's wrong, and led you to an examining room. Depending on how far in their training they are, they will be approved to treat minor injuries, sunburns, colds on their own and assist Healer Masuto for more significant injuries."

He stopped and knocked on an open office door. Harry had the impression of a wall of books with other walls covered in various charts of the human body. A chair was turned away from the door, towards the bookshelves. At the sound of the knock, the chair spun around to reveal an Asian man with round wire-rimmed glasses wearing a white coat over a light blue shirt and black trousers.

"Good afternoon Taguchi, this is Harry Potter, our transfer student from England. Harry, this is Healer Masuto who runs our Clinic. He works closely with Ms. Sadler who you met at lunch."

The middle-aged Healer inclined his head towards Harry and smiled gently. "Good afternoon, Harry. Thank you for making the time for the health check. Let's go to one of the examining rooms."

He led the boy to another room and closed the door. The room was the size of a small bedroom and held an adjustable bed, a chair and a stool on wheels, besides a counter, small sink, and several cupboards.

"Just take a seat wherever you're comfortable, Harry." He waited until Harry sat on the edge of the chair. "Now I just need to run a quick diagnostic scan. This will automatically fill out a form with any injuries you've had, such as broken bones or major illnesses so that we have a good record. Once that's done if I don't need to follow up on anything, you can be on your way."

Harry relaxed at that, and smiled hesitantly. "OK sir."

Healer Masuto withdrew his wand and uttered a Latin incantation. Harry felt a tingle begin at his scalp and gradually moved down his body. When it reached his toes, the Healer tapped his wand on a stack of papers. They glowed briefly and stretching his neck, Harry could see boxes being checked and words being written.

"Hmm, I see that you had a mail interdiction that was recently removed and that you currently have two different tracking charms on you. Are those at your guardian's request?"

Harry's eyes narrowed slightly. "No sir. My guardian is non-magical and would never have approved such a thing. Can you remove them?"

"I expect so, and if I can't, your Charms teacher Mr. Middleton will be able to." He cast two Latin incantations, each causing a mildly unpleasant sensation as if an adhesive bandage had been ripped off. The Healer made a note on one of the pieces of paper. "There, that's removed them. Now, you're a bit malnourished Harry, and it's affected your growth and bones. I'll put you on a nutrient potion that you will take with every meal for one month, then twice a day for a month. By the third month, you'll take it once a day. After that, depending on whether it's needed, we may want to stimulate your growth with a mild potion to reach where you should be for your age." Harry grinned broadly at the thought of not being the smallest boy in his class.

Masuto glanced up from the paper he was reviewing and looked over his glasses at Harry curiously. "I see you had to regrow all the bones in one arm."

"Quidditch accident and a professor that didn't wait for the mediwitch. He banished all of the bones by accident instead of mending the broken one. The mediwitch gave me Skele-gro to regrow them overnight."

The Healer frowned sympathetically. "That wasn't pleasant, I'm sure." He looked further down the page. "What about this injury on your arm? The spell said it was from a bite."

Harry squirmed uncomfortably. "Well sir, there was this basilisk..."

"Basilisk!" The man visibly composed himself. "My apologies, Harry, please continue."

"Um, there was this basilisk and it bit me. I know it's usually fatal, but a phoenix cried on the bite wound and healed me."

The Healer frowned slightly as he made another notation. "Would you mind if I take a sample of your blood for testing? I want to make sure there isn't a long-term effect or interaction with the venom and tears."

Harry flinched but said, "I guess that's OK, sir." The Healer opened a cupboard and withdrew a glass vial. Holding it over a vein in Harry's arm he said, "You'll like this. It's a way of banishing a few cc's of

blood right into the vial, so there's no puncture to heal. Expello vegrandis vis cruor!" The vial filled with the thick deep red substance and the Healer quickly filled out a label and attached it to the vial.

"Now, about the scar on your forehead, what can you tell me about it?"

Harry automatically tugged his bangs over the scar. "Well, I don't remember it, but there was this dark wizard. He killed my parents, but when he cast the Avada Kedavra at me, it bounced back and destroyed his body leaving him a spirit and me with the scar. I think my Mum must have given me a special protection when she died."

The Healer lifted Harry's bangs and looked closely at the scar. "I can tell that you don't like people looking at it, but there are indications of Dark Magic around the scar and I'm not comfortable ignoring it. I would like to bring in one or two specialists in curses to look at it and see if we can't remove it."

Harry's eyes widened. "Remove it? Really?" He rubbed his forehead without thinking about it. He hated being defined by the scar and having everyone look at it before him. "That would be wicked! Do you think you could?"

"I think there's a good chance that we can remove the Dark Magic at the very least. It's not healthy for anyone to have that type of sustained Dark Magic in them, but especially not a growing boy."

Harry grinned at the Healer, "Anything to remove or lessen it would be brilliant, sir!"

Healer Matuso chuckled at the boy's enthusiasm and made another note on the final paper. "OK, then, I'll let you know when to come see me again. I'll also let the house elves know to send the nutrient potion with your meals."

The Healer led him back to the reception area, where Vice Principal Talbot was working on papers that were spread across the small table in front of him. Upon seeing Harry, he put them into a briefcase which he then shrank and put in a pocket of his sport coat.

"All set then Harry," he asked pleasantly.

"Yes sir, thank you." Harry turned to the Healer. "Thank you for your time, Healer Matuso."

"My pleasure, Harry. I'll see you soon."

As they exited the building, Talbot looked at him appraisingly. "It must be almost 9:00 PM your time. Shall we go through the rest of the campus another time and head back to your room?"

Harry shrugged uncomfortably, "Whatever you want, sir." He wasn't used to being asked what he wanted.

"Then let's head back. We planned to give you tomorrow to recover from the trip and time zone change and then have the appropriate instructors test you on the classes that you took at Hogwarts. Once those are graded, we'll plan out your schedule and arrange a time to get any supplies that aren't carried on campus. How does that sound?"

Harry nodded at the man. "That sounds good, sir. Thinking of supplies, what do the students wear? We had a uniform at Hogwarts and robes were required as well."

"Ah yes, many boarding schools do have uniforms, but we permit nice casual clothing. The dress code isn't too restrictive. For male students, you may wear slacks, collared shirts, sweaters, as well as turtleneck shirts and sweaters. Shoes or boots are acceptable as long as they aren't sneakers as they don't offer enough protection. For the shirts, nothing with words unless it's "St. Croix Academy". Outside of class you may wear jeans and denim shirts. Protective robes and gloves are needed for Potions and occasionally you'll need gloves in Herbology and Magic Creatures. You have the option to wear day robes over your casual clothes, but they are not required. For formal events, you have the choice of either magical or non-magical formal attire."

Harry realized he could get by with his Hogwarts uniform slacks and shirts for a while. "Excuse me sir, but what are sneakers?"

Talbot chuckled at the question. "Casual shoes that are made of a canvas like material."

"Oh, trainers." His old trainers were too big as they were from Dudley and were torn as well. He would have to buy another pair for the weekends if he wanted anything other than his old uniform shoes.

"Would you tell me where to find a bank, sir? I have a vault at Gringotts in London. They said they had branches around the world."

"There is a Gringotts branch in St. Paul on Eastern Avenue, which is part of a block of shops and businesses with wards to make it unnoticeable to non-magical residents. There are clothing shops there as well."

Harry nodded, storing the information away for future use. "What about Hedwig, sir? Is it OK for her to stay in my room or is there an Owlery?"

"There is an Owlery by the Magical Creatures barn, but she may also stay in your room on a perch when she doesn't want to be in the Owlery."

They reached Blair House again and Talbot stopped in the foyer. "If that's all Harry, I'll leave you for the day, then. Feel free to explore tomorrow. Breakfast is served between 7:00 and 8:45, Lunch from 11:30 and 1:30 PM, and dinner between 5:30 and 7:30. The laundry hamper in your wardrobe will send your clothes automatically to the laundry for cleaning, but you are responsible for keeping your room and bathroom clean. If you miss a meal, you may head to the kitchen for a snack, but try not to make a habit of it."

"Thank you sir, for everything. Oh and sir? How should I address you? Vice Principal Talbot? Professor Talbot? Mr. Talbot?"

The man chuckled before answering, "Vice Principal Talbot is quite a mouthful except for an introduction or perhaps a very formal occasion. Mr. Talbot will be fine."

"Yes sir, thank you again sir," Harry replied, then blushed for not saying "Mr. Talbot".

"You're very welcome, Harry. I'm looking forward to seeing how you do in your entrance exams. Have a good night."

Upstairs, Harry saw that Hedwig had not returned yet. He decided it was time to send out some letters, and sat down at his desk. As nervous as he was, this was something that needed to be done.

The first letter he decided to send to Professor McGonagall rather than to the Headmaster as she was the one who always sent the communication from the school. He decided on something short and to the point.

Deputy Headmaster McGonagall

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Dear Professor McGonagall,

This letter is to inform you that I will not be returning to Hogwarts. With my guardian's permission, I transferred to another school where I will complete my education.

Thank you for your help and assistance over the past two years.

Sincerely,

Harry James Potter

He considered removing the "thank you", since his Head of House had disregarded Ron, Hermione and him when they came to her with concerns about Quirrell attempting to steal the Philosopher's Stone in his first year and did nothing to stop the "Heir of Slytherin" comments in his second year, but finally decided it was better not to burn any bridges as the Muggle saying went.

Now for the more difficult letters to his two friends.

Dear Ron and Hermione,

This is a really hard letter to write, but I need to tell you that I'm not going to be returning to Hogwarts this year. It was a hard decision to make, but I hope you'll understand and support me. In fact, Hermione, you should be proud of me. I remembered your advice about making lists before making a major decision and did just that.

When you list out every time I was almost killed in my first and second years, it's right scary. I'm not talking about Potions accidents or jinxes in the hall, but deliberate murder attempts. There have been five attempts on my life in only two years at Hogwarts. When you add Snape's abuse, Binn's incompetence, Filch's threats and the antagonism between the Houses, I simply couldn't justify continuing to pay for a second-rate education in a dangerous environment.

Harry stopped and looked at the last sentence, then crossed out "a second-rate education" and substituted "another year". Since they were still attending Hogwarts, there was no reason to criticize the quality of their education. Ron would be insulted while Hermione would be horrified. Satisfied that the insult was gone, Harry continued writing.

With my relatives' approval, I researched alternate magical schools and found quite a few of them, including those that offer more classes than Hogwarts does. I kept quiet about it until I was accepted at a new school because I found some odd things going on in my life; more than I knew about before.

Thanks for being the best friends a guy could have. I hope we can be pen pals from now on!

Harry

P.S. Ron, please thank your brothers for joining you in rescuing me last year and your parents for letting me stay at the Burrow last summer. You have an amazing family!

He duplicated the letter, and addressed one to Hermione and the second to Ron. Opening his trunk, he withdrew his two-way mailbox and put the letters in the outgoing side of the box. They disappeared with a brief flash of light.

Harry undressed and climbed into bed. So much had happened; he wondered how he would ever trust an adult again. The Dursleys treated him like a slave, called him names and kept him in a cupboard. His primary school teachers ignored the fact that one cousin was obese, well dressed and spoiled, while the other was half-starved and in rags. At Hogwarts, he had enough to eat, but an abusive teacher, multiple murder attempts and a Headmaster with

questionable motives. "Mr. Talbot seemed nice though," he thought tiredly. "But then so did Dumbledore. I'll just keep my head down, my eyes and options open and see what happens next."

Chapter 4 – Please Let Me Pass

Harry awoke the next morning and smiled at the warm and comfortable bed. Hogwarts beds were always so much more comfortable than the Dur... He sat up abruptly and squinted his eyes at the room. "It wasn't a dream," he whispered to himself. "I really left the Dursleys. I'm really in the U.S. at a different school!"

He reached for his glasses and the room came into focus again. His attention was drawn to the glowing box on his desk. His heart skipped a beat and then began beating rapidly. "Oh no," he muttered. "Why didn't I wait to write any letters? I should have waited until my entrance exams were over. Stupid, Harry! Stupid!"

He reached a shaking hand out to the box and opened the incoming mail side. To his surprise, it wasn't from Hogwarts or either of his friends, but had an impressive seal on it. He knew it should be free of hexes, but still opened it hesitantly. To his surprise, it was from the legal firm of Townsend, Lee and Pemberton who were representing a client that wanted him to be a spokesperson for their line of young men's clothing. If interested, he was asked to have his agent or solicitor contact Argos Pemberton. "The mail ward," he thought, "this is what it was preventing."

He considered the offer while he showered and dressed, then sat down to pen a polite refusal, but said he would contact them should that decision change. He placed it in the outgoing side of his mail box and smiled as it was flashed away.

His stomach growled, and with a quick Tempus spell, he realized it was a few minutes after 7:00 AM and that breakfast was being served. He heard a few sounds in some of the rooms he passed, but it was mostly quiet as he headed down dining room. He stepped inside and was looking about hesitantly when Ms. Sadler waved him over to the table where she sat alone.

"You're up early, Harry" she said with a warm smile. "Most of the students don't come down until closer to eight o'clock."

"Yes ma'am," he replied politely. "My relatives had me up early to make breakfast, so I'm used to it." He noticed that she had a plate with waffles covered in purplish syrup on her plate and he quickly reviewed the card in front of him. He tapped the waffles himself, but

selected maple syrup. He also selected a bowl of cut fruit to accompany it as well as milk. Almost immediately, a plate, bowl, and glass appeared at his place. He was surprised to see a potion appear as well, until he remembered that Healer Masuto wanted him to take one three times a day for a month. "How clever of the kitchen staff to recognize it was for him," he thought.

He drank the potion down, grimacing at the taste and then quickly replaced it with a bite of fresh melon, followed by a swallow of milk. "That's not so bad," he decided.

"What are your plans for the day, Harry," asked his Residence supervisor. She gave him a friendly look over her coffee cup.

Harry sat a bit straighter under her watchful eye. "Mr. Talbot said my entrance exams would begin after today, so I thought I should revise," he answered respectfully.

She looked puzzled at his comment. "Revise?"

He was confused by her question and stopped the fork before it reached his mouth. "Yes ma'am. Err..study for the entrance exams."

She smiled again in understanding. "I see. It must be more of a British term. I'm sure we'll find a number of expressions that will need to be explained over the course of the next year."

"Yes ma'am." He swallowed and then asked, "Are there copies of the first and second year textbooks in the library? I only have my Hogwarts books, but shouldn't I review the St. Croix books?"

The friendly amber eyes lost their focus slightly as she considered the question. "To be honest, Harry, I think that might add more stress than it would relieve. We know you were educated under a different curriculum and won't expect you to know what we taught. Instead, you'll be tested on what you know and how it would place you with other ninth grade students."

He grinned at her suddenly. "I'm not used to being called a ninth grade student. We were always First Year, Second Year, Third Year up to Seventh Year. It's funny to think I'm being called a ninth grade student when seventh years are the graduating class at Hogwarts."

The Healing instructor chuckled with him. "Different cultures, different terms. I hope you'll be comfortable with ours, Harry."

After breakfast, Harry headed back to his room, smiling shyly at the students he passed. Most smiled back, although some turned to look after him curiously. Once in his rooms, he filled his backpack with his first and second year books, and went to find the warded spell room that Mr. Talbot had mentioned.

He started with Charms and worked through the spells, levitating his text books first, and then locking and unlocking the spell room door. By the end of three hours, he had practiced all of his first and second year Charms and had started on his Transfiguration spells. When his stomach growled, he replaced the books in his backpack and carried it down to the dining room.

He found the two boys he had met the previous day at a table and moved to that table. Before he could say anything, the round faced boy with the light brown skin and hair saw him and smiled. "Hi Harry, have a seat. I'm Hugh, if you don't remember, and this joker is Rich," he jerked a thumb at the taller boy.

His friend rolled his eyes, but said pompously, "I hope you found your first night acceptable, Harry."

Hugh leaned forward and whispered loudly, "His dad is in the diplomatic corps and Rich has to attend a lot of stuffy events. Don't mind him."

Rich rolled his eyes and took a bite of his sandwich, ignoring what was obviously a worn joke between them.

"I had a good night, thanks," answered Harry after grinning at Hugh. His stomach growled again and Harry quickly selected a sandwich and chips, and then added a soup to it and chocolate milk. Again, his nutrient potion appeared, so he drank it down quickly. Looking at his plate, he blinked in surprise as he picked up a crisp.

"Something wrong, Harry" asked Hugh taking in his surprised expression.

"I thought I was getting chips, but I got crisps. I must have read it wrong." He shrugged and ate the chip.

Hugh looked at him in confusion. "But those are chips. Potato chips."

Rich smirked at the two other boys. "In the U.S., what you call chips, we call French fries or just fries. What you call crisps, we call potato chips. I learned that when my Father was assigned to London for a year."

"Cool" Hugh said around a bite of his sandwich. "We'll probably learn a lot of different terms this year then, eh Harry?"

Harry nodded as he swallowed a spoonful of a delicious chicken noodle soup. "I surprised Ms. Sadler this morning by saying I had to 'revise' for my exams tomorrow."

Rich buttered a roll on his plate. "Revise must mean review or study? Interesting, since it usually means to make changes."

Hugh finished his meal and wiped his mouth on the thick paper napkin, then crumpled it and tossed it on his empty plate. "Where did you go and what was your favorite class, Harry? I remember last night that you said your last school was in a castle. That's very cool."

Harry talked in between bites of his soup, hoping to make friends of these two boys. "I went to Hogwarts, and yes it's a castle in Scotland. I didn't know I was a wizard until I received my letter to there. I liked Charms, because Professor Flitwick was fun. Professor McGonagall taught Transfiguration and was my Head of House and she was pretty stern. I didn't like Potions at all, but that was only because the Professor went to school with my Dad and seemed to hate him, so he went out of his way to make fun of me or pick on me. Astronomy was OK and so was Herbology. I loved flying the best though. I was a Seeker on the Quidditch team."

That started a discussion on sports that continued until the end of lunch. Harry wandered outside Blair House after that, hoping to study in the fresh air. He was delighted to find a white gazebo with a table and chairs a little bit away from the house. He spent the afternoon revising his Astronomy and Herbology, reading carefully through both his first and second year books, and answering any quiz questions at the end of a chapter. When his shoulder muscles began to ache, he stretched and walked around the gazebo a few

times. He cast Tempus and found that dinner had started thirty minutes earlier. He again stowed his books in his backpack and headed to the dining hall.

Hugh and Rich were seated with Ms. Sadler again, and he quickly took a seat next to the brown haired woman. He selected a chicken and broccoli stir fry with just water to drink. He drank down his nutrient potion and tried not to make a face, but Hugh snickered at him and he scrunched his nose back, acknowledging the bad taste.

"Looks nasty, Harry. Do you need to take those long," asked the friendly boy sympathetically.

"Healer Masuto said three times a day for a month, then twice a day for a month and then once a day. It's just a nutrient potion. He says my bones aren't as strong as they should be." Harry shrugged and turned to his dinner, enjoying the flavor. He liked how Hogwarts served family style, but there was something to be said for tailoring a meal. He could get used to it.

"Have you been studying all day? What do you still have to... 'revise'," asked their Residence supervisor with a smile at the word.

"Yes ma'am," Harry acknowledged, "I re-read all but my Potions and History. Those will probably be my worst scores." He frowned at his plate and fervently hoped he would pass the entrance exams. He really wanted to stay here.

The Healing instructor noticed the suddenly dejected face and patted his hand comfortingly. "You'll be fine, Harry. We don't expect perfection; just that you try hard." She patted his hand again and he nodded. He would try his best.

He returned to his room after dinner to find an envelope on his bed. Opening it, he found an exam schedule from Mr. Talbot. He breathed a sigh of relief to find out that it would be spread over two and a half days. Tomorrow from 9:00-11:00 he would be tested on Charms, then from 1:00-3:00 would be Potions, followed by History from 3:30 to 5:30. The following day he would have Herbology / Botany from 9:00-11:00, Transfiguration from 1:00 – 3:00, then Astronomy from 3:30-5:00. The following morning, he would have Battle Magic from 9:00-11:00. He was pleased and relieved to

realize that they limited the amount of spell casting he would have to do per day; he had been tired after casting every spell from his first two years in Charms and Transfiguration this morning.

He spent the evening reading through first History and then Potions; although he had to admit that he spent more time on Potions than History. He always heard Binns monotone voice droning in his head when he read his History book.

Finally, he got ready for bed, but sat stroking Hedwig for a while. "I hope I do all right, Hedwig. I can't go back to the Dursleys. And I'm not sure I'll live through another year at Hogwarts. I've got to pass everything. I've got to!" Hedwig rubbed her head on his cheek and then nibbled his fingers affectionately.

"Well, at least I'll get two of my three worst classes out of the way tomorrow. And it's not like Snape will be hovering over me and yelling during the Potions test. That's got to improve my grade." With that happy thought, he let Hedwig out to hunt for the night and turned off the lights. "I've got to pass", he mumbled. "I've just got to."

Earlier that day in Diagon Alley, one owl took off immediately with a letter tied to her leg, while another two that Grover Stillman tried to send out refused to leave the Owlery. The only reason they would refuse was if the recipients were warded against mail, out of the country or dead. "Will you take them tomorrow" he asked the owls. They stared at him unblinkingly. "Hmph, what about next week?" Again two pairs of eyes met his. "Next month," he tried. Both birds relaxed, nodded their heads and clicked their beaks at him. "OK then, they must be out of the country." He moved the letters to a folder dated August.

The third owl flew around the school in Scotland until she found her target. She landed on a wide stone ledge and tapped imperiously on the window until a woman with dark hair pulled into a severe bun came over and opened the window. She received an owl treat and the offer of water from the woman, but a scent of cat made her think of predators, so she hopped back out the window after devouring her reward.

Minerva McGonagall read the letter through, then read it again more slowly. "Harry Potter withdrawing from Hogwarts," she said quietly. "Unbelievable. What would his parents think?" She paused and

considered the boy's first two years. Perhaps James and Lily would have found another option themselves, considering everything that happened to the poor child. Another thought struck her and pinched the bridge of her nose. "What will Albus do when he returns from the ICW?"

She sat thoughtfully for several minutes, thinking about Harry Potter. He was the image of James, but without the callous disregard for those not part of his clique. In fact, he was a quiet, shy and well-mannered boy when not flying. When he flew, he seemed much more animated.

Her eyes widened. Flying! She then closed her eyes as if in pain. "There goes the Quidditch Cup," she whispered in a pained voice.

After several more minutes, she nodded to herself and folded the letter. Albus was spending the month of July attending to his duties as the Supreme Mugwump at the International Confederation of Wizards. As much as she didn't want to lose him, Harry deserved some peace and quiet after the two tumultuous years at Hogwarts. Perhaps Albus would convince him to return, but she wouldn't bring up his withdrawal until the Headmaster returned in August.

Michael Talbot slipped into the conference room and sat in the empty chair to the right of the Principal. She gave him a brief welcoming smile that warmed her onyx eyes. He returned the smile and gave a nod to the other men and women around the table, and then sat back giving all of his attention to the ebony-skinned woman leading the meeting. Once again he admired her long black hair accented by a few silver streaks that were swept back and held with elaborate combs.

After Michael was settled, Victoria opened a folder in front of her. "I would first like to thank you all for taking the time to give an evaluation to our newest applicant. I know it was unscheduled, so appreciate your time." Her rich voice was both soothing and authoritative. "Harry Potter wrote and asked to attend the Academy after his first two years at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. From his letter, it appeared one reason he wanted to leave was his notoriety after the Ministry proclaimed he had vanquished the dark wizard who called himself Lord Voldemort, who had been terrorizing the population a dozen years ago."

She looked around the table and met each of the teacher's eyes briefly. "Obviously, our classes are slightly different than our European counterparts, so we need to be assured that he can succeed in this school. Adam, you had him first. What is your evaluation?"

Adam Middleton had just celebrated his centennial birthday earlier in the year which coincided with his 70th year teaching at the Academy. Although he had age lines in his face, he easily could be mistaken for being twenty years younger with his shoulder-length white-blond hair, fair skin and sharp hazel eyes. His voice was steady as he opened his folder and reviewed his notes.

"We began with a written exam of course, and then I asked the boy to demonstrate the spells he could remember from his first two years in Charms. He successfully demonstrated Lumos and Nox followed by Wingardium Leviosa to levitate sequentially heavier objects, starting with a feather and continuing through to a desk. I should note that he showed no difference between levitating a feather or a desk. He also demonstrated Diffindo on both a cloth and wooden object, then used Reparo to fix what he cut. We discussed Aparecium to reveal invisible ink, but I didn't have any in the room for him to reveal. His written exam was acceptable, although not outstanding. I would say he has a firm grasp of practical charms, but could benefit with additional work with the theory behind it. Even so, I would have no problem accepting him into a ninth grade class."

Victoria nodded at her old friend and turned to the portly Potions Masters. "Alan, you had him that afternoon. How did that go?"

Potions Master Alan Metcalfe was a sixty year old round-faced man with short steel grey hair and astute blue eyes. Victoria valued him for his no-nonsense approach that enabled him to control his classroom through the sheer force of his personality. He took a deep breath and frowned before speaking.

"The boy was a bit of a disappointment, but it also reinforced the rumors I've heard at several Potions conferences. Potions Master Severus Snape is a highly acclaimed and valuable member of the Potions community. He is responsible for major improvements to Wolfsbane potion and significant advancements to other formulas. If he is a featured speaker at a conference, I make sure never to miss

it. However, his style is probably better suited to adults than children."

He frowned again at the pages in front of him. "Harry appeared to have almost no training whatsoever with the interaction of ingredients; something every seventh grader should be taught. It was as if all they did was work from a list of ingredients before they began brewing. He was amazed at the posters on the wall detailing the differences between ground and powdered ingredients or sliced versus slivered. However, I reviewed the boy's text books and there was little reference to what I consider mandatory supplemental reading. He did successfully brew potions from the seventh and eighth grade curriculums with a recipe in front of him, but I would accept him into my ninth grade class only if he was willing to spend the next five weeks working on basic potions theory."

The portly man frowned yet again, raising the curiosity of those seated at the table. While not a cheerful person, he was too even-tempered to frown so frequently. He raised troubled blue eyes to the Principal. "The boy raised some red flags with me. He seemed unnaturally grateful when I explained some of the theory to him. He seemed to tense whenever I was within a few feet of him, frequently hunching his shoulders. When I mentioned how well he chopped and diced, he was surprised at being complimented. He mentioned he helped out at his relatives in the kitchen." He looked at Victoria and added, "He particularly said 'his relatives', not 'at home' or 'with my family'."

Victoria made another notation on her papers. "Thank you, Alan. I appreciate your honesty and concerns. Philippa, you had him for History at the end of the day. What was your evaluation?"

Philippa Moore was one of the younger staff members as she was just entering her fourth decade. She was a big-boned woman with dark skin and a heart-shaped face. Her dark brown shoulder length hair was kept in a French knot. She taught not only World History, but Magical Culture and Customs as well as Magical Government and Law. Her normally warm brown eyes met the Principal's with concern. "I was going to go last, but Alan brought up some of what I saw. Firstly, he almost failed his History exam, but I learned that his class is taught by the ghost of the former professor!" She shook her head in amazement. "He appears to be stuck teaching the topic under discussion at the time of his death, which happened to be

goblin rebellions in Britain. Nothing was taught of history outside of Britain and most of the students viewed the course as independent study. Harry admitted that the ghost droned on in a monotone voice that literally put the class to sleep. He will need to be tutored in History to get up to speed. Like Alan, I would be willing to work with him over the next five weeks, perhaps set him a couple of essays per week to get him up to the rest of the students his age."

She tapped the pen in her hand against her notepad several times as she carefully considered her next words. "I took the opportunity to ask him some questions about Magical Culture and Customs and learned that he was raised by non-magical guardians. He knew nothing about the magical world until he received a letter announcing his acceptance to Hogwarts. He didn't know that he was considered famous for defeating a dark wizard until he was mobbed on a trip to buy his school supplies. Out of my own curiosity, I asked what books were recommended for non-magical born or raised students, and was surprised to learn that he hadn't been provided anything. Also, Hogwarts had no introductory class for those raised outside of magical society. I loaned him two books that explained magical societies and cultures throughout the world, and he was both excited to read them and very grateful that I suggested them."

She looked at Alan across the table from her. "I found him to be uncomfortable with any questions about his life before Hogwarts or his time at home between terms. I have to say though, that he is an extremely polite and respectful boy, much more so than most teenagers these days."

Victoria spent a minute writing as Philippa finished speaking. "Thank you, Philippa." She shook her head, and then turned to Grace Langley. "Grace, you had him first on the second day. What was your evaluation?"

The middle-aged woman had deeply tanned dark olive skin from her hours in the sun, and her dark brown hair seemed coarse from too much wind and not enough conditioner. Victoria valued the woman for her sensible yet sharp-eyed nature and her sarcastic sense of humor.

"Harry and I walked through several of the greenhouses yesterday morning. He easily recognized Devil's Snare and knew that either light or flames would disable it. He recognized young mandrake

plants and spoke well and how to re-pot them and the possible dangers they cause. He was also quite familiar with Abyssian Shrivelfigs and we discussed how they were used in potions."

She paused and took a sip of the dark rich coffee she preferred. "However, his classes never looked at plants through microscopes and he didn't understand them from a botanist's perspective, only from a grower's perspective. Nevertheless, I think his knowledge was at an acceptable level to enter a ninth grade class."

She looked at Alan and Philippa for a moment before continuing, "We didn't speak about anything other than plants, the greenhouses and how the classes here are run. I found him a polite little thing and very eager to please."

"Thank you, Grace. What about Transfiguration, Roger?"

All eyes turned to the middle-aged affable man. Roger Latham had light brown hair that was just beginning to grey at the temples. His craggy face was relaxed and mild. "The boy passed his written exam with acceptable marks, but was even better in the practical application. He turned a button into a beetle, a piece of glass into stone, a book into a mouse and then the mouse back to a book. He also changed a porcupine into a pin cushion and back again. I can easily accept him into my ninth grade class." He considered briefly before adding, "He came into the class hesitant and nervous, but calmed down quickly. At one point, I had him transfigure a water tumbler into a goblet and told him to use his imagination with it. He made it frosted with etched patterns. When I congratulated him and said it was very well done, he first seemed surprised and then an enormous smile lit his face. I think perhaps he doesn't get told 'well done' very often."

A few frowns appeared on the other faces, but Victoria nodded and made a few more notations. "John, how was he at Astronomy?"

John Halle appeared to be in his early 40's with pale skin on a sharp-featured face. His dark hair was in a short severe cut that matched his austere expression. He was stubborn by nature, but meticulously fair with his students. He was also one of the two vampires on staff, a fact that by law was published in his staff biography in all publications. His wife provided his blood

nourishment, and he had proven himself over the years to be no threat to the students.

"I was amazed to learn that Hogwarts only holds its Astronomy classes at night, rather than using star maps, ceiling projections or other options. While I certainly approve of monthly late night classes, I was somewhat shocked that eleven year old students were regularly awake and expected to excel past 11:00 PM." He shook his head in amazement.

"The boy was polite and while he looked at me curiously, he didn't seem particularly afraid of my condition, but more nervous about passing the exam. He knew the current solar system, and the most common constellations and stars. He was able to correctly complete a partially filled in star map. However, he didn't seem to understand how Astronomy was used with Arithmancy, although I then discovered that Arithmancy wasn't offered until the ninth grade or what he called Third Year."

"Really!" "Why?" and several other exclamations met this announcement. John nodded, "Considering that the primary use of Astronomy is in Arithmancy calculations and Divination, I was surprised as well. I assumed they first wanted to give their students a good grounded education in other mathematics, but when I asked what mathematic classes they offered prior to Arithmancy, he said there were none."

The vampire sat back pleased that the shocked exclamations matched his own surprise of what the boy had told him. He didn't pay that much attention to magical schools outside of the U.S. and promised himself to run some comparisons between scores of all secondary schools. Perhaps Victoria already had those available. He would ask at the next staff meeting.

Victoria finally turned to Elizabeth Archer, their Battle Magic instructor for grades seven through ten. Liz was closest to her in age and their temperaments complimented one another. The woman's graying red hair, slender form and hollow cheeked appearance caused many new students to underestimate her. "Liz, how was our applicant in your exam?"

"He was on track with other students his age. He correctly demonstrated Confundus, Expelliarmus, Incendio, Locomotor Mortis,

Rictusempra, Serpensortia and Tarantallegra. With only a bare minimum of instruction, he also successfully cast a Petrificus Totalis. I then walked him through a few of the ninth grade spells, and he learned them very quickly." She looked at the other entrance exam teachers. "I'm not surprised to hear that his practical knowledge outstrips his theoretical, as he learned new spells with relative ease. I would be pleased to include him with my other ninth graders."

"Christina, you sat with him at meals; what is your opinion of the boy," asked Victoria.

The Healing instructor and Blair House supervisor considered her words carefully. "He is shy, somewhat reserved and exceptionally polite. He got along well with two of his peers, Hugh Porter and Rich Lovell. I would be very surprised if he turned out to be a trouble-maker as he's exceptionally eager to please."

Victoria nodded and turned to the Vice-Principal. "Michael, do you have anything to add?"

"Only that I found him intelligent, polite and anxious to please as well. If he meets the majority of our standards and is willing to work hard before the start of the next term, I think he would make a constructive addition to the school." He grinned slightly as he added, "If only to show the other teens how a politely raised young man can behave."

Later that evening, Victoria Graham looked over the entrance exam results again before returning to the medical report from Taguchi Masuto. Although medical information was confidential, all suspected cases of abuse had to be reported and he suspected long-term neglect as evidenced by malnutrition and weaker bone density. The boy's tenseness around the more intimidating instructors, and his anxiousness to please also seemed to indicate a harsh home life.

She tipped back in her chair and rubbed a hand across her brow. How was she going to handle a British celebrity who fled his country and whom they suspected was at best neglected? She shook her head and sat forward again, and then began to pen a note to the Academy's attorney.

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Chapter 5 – A Whirlwind of Activity

As Harry finished breakfast, Ms. Sadler asked him to join her for a few minutes to discuss his exam results. His heart began racing and he struggled to control his breathing as he followed her to the Residence Supervisor's office. He thought he had done fairly well on the spell-casting practical portions of his exams, but was worried about the written portions, especially in History and Potions. "Please let me have passed, please let me have passed," he chanted mentally.

The Healing instructor gave him a warm smile that lit her amber eyes as she waved him into the office. "Come in and have a seat, Harry. I'm sure you're nervous about your exam results, but I want to reassure you that you shouldn't be." She smiled again as tension eased out of the boy's shoulders and he sat on the edge of the chair in front of her desk, looking at her eagerly.

"Firstly, you passed both written and practical exams in Battle Magics, Charms and Transfiguration, although you might find some additional review on the theory helpful before starting the new term. You also did well on the non-scientific portion of the Botany exam, but haven't had any training on the more detailed scientific aspects of plants. You followed directions well in Potions, although your theory again needs to be improved. Your worst results were in History, but that seems to be because you only studied magical history and I believe a ghost taught that?"

Harry nodded apologetically, "Yes ma'am, Professor Binns. It was really hard to stay awake in his class."

"Perhaps your Headmaster was unaware that the spirit would be led to review only the topic he was teaching at the time of his death." She shuffled the pages in front of her and then looked at him over them with another smile.

"You are provisionally approved for the Fall term, if you are willing to work over the next five weeks with your instructors to fill in some of the missing knowledge." She smiled indulgently as he heaved a huge sigh of relief and an enormous grin lit his features. "The focus will be on History, Botany and basic Potions theory and techniques. Each of those instructors is willing to work with you three times a week for ninety minutes and then you would probably have a written

assignment due the next session. Those sessions will be on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. In addition, the Charms, Transfiguration and Battle Magics teachers will meet with you once a week for 90 minutes on either Tuesday or Thursday with a weekly assignment."

She met his emerald eyes with her warm amber ones. "Is that acceptable to you, Harry?"

The broad grin stayed on his face as he responded enthusiastically, "Yes ma'am! I'll work very hard to be ready for the start of the Fall term!" He tried not to squirm in his chair with excitement. He was staying!

"Very good, I'll let your teachers know and we'll have a schedule to you by the end of the day, plus you'll want to go to the campus book store for supplies and determine what else you need to purchase in either Stillwater or St. Paul."

The grin still hadn't left the boy's face. "Thank you, ma'am. I have some galleons with me, but Mr. Talbot said there is a Gringotts branch nearby that I'll want to visit."

"There is. Until you're in tenth grade, you'll need to be accompanied by an adult. As your Residence Supervisor, it will likely be me." She grinned mischievously at him, "I should mention or perhaps warn you that I really like shopping, Harry."

As he digested that and hesitantly smiled back at her, she continued, "I also want to make sure that you understand my role as the Residence Supervisor for Blair House. I'm here to answer any questions any student might have. I will help handle any residential, academic or personal issues that arise. If an emergency comes up, I will help secure any assistance you might need." She smiled again as she met his eyes. "I will offer a sympathetic ear when needed and will be happy to act as a sounding board if you want to bounce ideas off me. I also enforce the school's standards and rules. I think I mentioned that I start with one thousand word essays and add one thousand words for each subsequent infraction?"

He nodded emphatically. While writing was better than scrubbing cauldrons, a two thousand word essay would not be fun! Plus he didn't want to give them any cause to regret accepting him.

"One of the ways I also try to help is as a counselor for choosing your classes. We usually start Arithmancy in the seventh grade. I would like to suggest that you sign up for a tutor this fall to prepare yourself before joining a class. With one-on-one attention, you might be able to catch up over the course of the year, and then join your year group next year."

"Yes ma'am," he agreed. "How do I sign up for a tutor?"

"That's one of the tasks I can help with, Harry. If you don't want to involve me, there are bulletin boards in the first floor common room that show services available. However, I know that Ashwini Ranganathan will be available. She's in the tenth grade this year and is at the top of her class for Arithmancy. Because she wants to be a teacher, she likes to sign up as a tutor to get practical experience. I think you'll like her."

"I hope she likes me," he said with a shy smile. He also hoped that Ashwini was a bit better than Hermione at explaining difficult concepts. She always seemed to take it as a personal failure if Harry didn't catch on to something immediately, adding more stress to their study sessions.

"Now let's talk about your classes for the year. The mandatory Core classes are the ones in the entrance exam, plus physical education and a basic mathematics class. Most students take two or three electives, but because you'll be having tutoring in Arithmancy, you might want to limit it to one or two.

They spent nearly an hour discussing the many options available. In the end, he asked to include Latin as one elective to help him understand spells as well as their pronunciation more thoroughly. Ms. Sadler approved the choice, pointing out that it also gave him a strong grounding in many other languages that were based on Latin. He was concerned about the number of classes he was taking so decided not to take both Art and Music, but finally selected a Music Appreciation class that was listed as providing "an introduction to all forms of music, from classical to jazz to bluegrass to hip-hop to rock."

"There are so many options, it's really hard to choose," Harry complained. "I really want to take Healing, but can't fit it in. Plus the Warding classes look really interesting."

Ms. Sadler nodded. "I would recommend that you take Healing and Biology together, or take Biology first and then follow with Healing. And yes, Mr. Madison makes Warding a very interesting course. Perhaps next year you'll have time in one of the accelerated summer courses for one or two of them."

Once his schedule was completed, she produced a form for him to sign as an International student that would be filed with the magical government, who would subsequently handle the appropriate non-magical forms and provide him something called a Student Visa.

He left very excited and returned to his room to pick up the campus map. Once outside, he followed a cobblestone path to the Campus Bookstore with his list of classes. He needed to find out how much money he would have to withdraw from Gringotts to purchase his year's supplies. He also authorized automatic tuition payment to St. Croix Academy and stopped any payments to Hogwarts.

The Campus Bookstore was very different than Flourish and Blott's. The tiled floors and metal shelves were less warm and welcoming than the wooden floors and shelves found in the Diagon Alley store. Three quarters of the store was dedicated to text books. He looked over his classes and found the books arranged by topic and then each class requirement was listed on a shelf tag. He added the cost of the books in his head to determine how much he would need. Next he turned to notebooks, journals, pens and other supplies and added those into his running total. Yes, he definitely needed to visit Gringotts.

Next, he looked for seventh and eighth grade History, Botany and Potions books. He was surprised to see a detailed encyclopedia of ingredients and their interactions as part of the beginning Potions material. The pictures in the book were similar to what he had seen on the class room wall, clearly showing the difference in how correctly prepared ingredients should appear. Even more, it detailed what would happen when the ingredients were prepared too finely or roughly. His eyes widened as he realized potency could dramatically increase or too much heat could make something toxic. He never knew that and he bet Neville Longbottom didn't either.

He decided to spend his existing galleons on these beginning texts and buy the Fall term books out of money he would pick up at

Gringotts. Looking around the store, he found shirts, sweatshirts and pants, shorts, as well as basic toiletry necessities. In one corner were a number of posters, similar to the one above his roommate's bed. He looked through them, but none caught his eye enough to purchase. He headed to the checkout, and noticed that there were not only packaged sweets, but nuts, raisins and other snacks. He picked up a package of something called "Trail Mix" to snack on later.

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The next five weeks went by in a blur of activity. Ms. Sadler took him to Eastern Avenue in St. Paul, where he confirmed his funds were available and could be magically transferred from Diagon Alley. Under Ms. Sadler's prompting, he asked about a debit card, and discovered they were available for a small annual fee.

"Not carrying a coin bag is much better," he said happily as they exited Gringott's. Thank you for suggesting it Ms. Sadler.

"Not at all, Harry. I know I prefer to use a debit card myself and thought you might as well." With the older woman's help, he purchased his text books, Potions and writing supplies in record time.

As they exited the book store, Ms. Sadler said hesitantly, "I noticed that you wear white shirts and grey trousers most of the time, Harry. Is that your Hogwarts uniform?"

Harry felt his cheeks warm. Was he doing something wrong? "Yes ma'am," he replied. "Is that a problem?"

"Not at all," she hastened to assure him. "I just know that many of the boys prefer jeans, t-shirts and sneakers outside of class. Because I don't know what Hogwarts permitted, I didn't know if you wanted to obtain some other clothing."

He hadn't thought too much about it, because he could always hide his worn hand-me-downs under a school robe, but since he rarely saw anyone wearing one, he probably did need something else. It would certainly be nice to have something that fit him besides a uniform, and since he wouldn't be returning to the Dursley's, they couldn't take it away from him.

"Yes ma'am," he said with a smile. "If you don't object, I would like to pick up a few casual outfits."

She grinned and reminded him, "Have you forgotten how I said I loved shopping?" A whirlwind tour of Eastern Avenue and a non-magical department store saw him with a full wardrobe of Fall and Winter clothing, although he had blushed bright red when she had the clerk in the department store include undershirts, briefs, and socks.

Over the next several weeks, he met several other students that were staying for the summer, besides Hugh and Rich. Two were twin boys that were entering the eighth grade and he also met a ninth grade girl that would be in his classes.

The Templeton twins weren't at all like the Weasley twins, he was surprised to discover. They had muddy brown hair, brown eyes and a splash of freckles across their nose and cheeks. However, Aaron was a loud and gregarious sports enthusiast, who played Quidditch (Chaser and sometimes Keeper), soccer and baseball. Once he found out that Harry played Seeker, he sought him out to discuss the games Harry had played in, the strategies used, and to commiserate with him about demented Quidditch captains. "We had Brian Everest for the last two years," he said with an exaggerated shudder. "I think he might be your Oliver Wood's long lost twin!"

Adrian Templeton played soccer with his brother, but was more interested in music than anything else, which his brother grinned and shrugged at indulgently. He was rarely seen without his magical keyboard that folded into the size of a book, but when unfolded provided a full keyboard that was charmed to sound like a piano, organ, or even a synthesizer. While friendly, he wasn't the extrovert his brother was. "Take care, Harry" he said with a grin, "always have an escape plan in your back pocket if you follow any of my brother's plans." He ducked the swat that followed from his brother.

He met ninth grader Audrey Dunham in the gazebo behind Blair House. The pudgy girl blushed heavily when she encountered him, apologized and began to retreat. She had a sketch pad with her and an art book, so he pushed his books aside to make room for her and invited her to join him. She sat down with him hesitantly. Over the course of the morning, he discovered that she was painfully shy, so simply smiled and didn't force conversation.

Harry made sure to sit with each of those he had met at different meals, especially Audrey, since she was so shy. She would smile hesitantly and listen to the conversations without contributing unless Harry deliberately drew her in.

His weeks working closely with Mr. Metcalfe were as different as time spent in Snape's Potion Lab as could be imagined. The Potions Master expressed his warm approval for Harry searching out and buying the beginning Potions book. With each ninety minute session, the portly man explained the benefits of the potion under discussion, the role of each ingredient, the impact of heat, stirring and sequence of adding it to the brew, as well as how each ingredient interacted with the others. Many times, he had Harry wear goggles to avoid fumes in his eyes, and the boy had to wonder why they never used them at Hogwarts. Over their time together, Harry realized Mr. Metcalfe would never scream at him or humiliate him and began to relax when the man was standing behind him. If he did something wrong, the teacher explained why it was wrong and how to correct it or why it couldn't be fixed. All in all, the former Gryffindor was amazed at how interesting Potions could be.

Harry's most exhausting sessions were with Mrs. Moore and World History. In his first session, he came prepared to take comprehensive notes, promising himself to make even Hermione proud. However, Mrs. Moore had another idea.

"Harry, since you've primarily studied British magical history, we're going to approach this from another angle. We're going to look at some of the most important events in History from around the world, what made the event important and what opportunities they provided for the future. If we are discussing wars or military advances, we'll take a little time to discuss the culture of the societies involved and how it contributed to each defeat or victory that occurred."

"For example, what do you think was one of the major events that happened thousands of years ago? People lived in small tribes, and were primarily hunter-gatherers, meaning they hunted for meat and gathered roots, berries, and other edibles. They wore the skins of animals for clothing. For that type of tribe, what do you think would be a significant advancement?"

Harry frowned in thought. "Well, if they already had fire, maybe they learned how to smoke meat to preserve it longer?"

The dark-skinned woman nodded and gave him an encouraging smile. "Good thinking! That would be one advancement. It would allow them to spend more time between hunts on other activities and would help them preserve their food through the winter. Now, what would cause them to go from a wandering tribe to a more stationary community?"

"Um...", Harry thought desperately, not wanting to disappoint the woman. "They could...learn to farm?"

He was rewarded with another warm smile. "Very good! In Mesopotamia around 3500 BC, they invented both the wheel and plough. The wheel made movement and carrying of goods and supplies much easier, while the plough helped them grow their food rather than having to keep moving to find it. Mesopotamia is also famous because only 300 years later, the written word was created there. The modern alphabet was invented around 1600 BC, which corresponded with the first documented evidence of shamans and magic users."

Over the course of the next five weeks, Harry learned about the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, which provided a foundation in justice, law, engineering and of course, warfare. He also learned about Alexander the Great and Hannibal, and wrote essays on why each succeeded and then was subsequently defeated.

He worked his way through Charlemagne's rule and then the Magna Carta (which he remembered studying in primary school), which became the origin of modern constitutional rule. He learned how Gutenberg's press in 1455 made mass-market reading possible, and also became the point where magic schools, including Hogwarts, began developing school texts. Over the remainder of the time, he learned how Cortes began to conquer South America in 1519; that the foundation of modern physics was introduced when Isaac Newton published Principia Mathematic in 1687 and the American Declaration of Independence in 1776, which led to the rise of American power.

They spent three full sessions on the last 200 years and the amazing amount of technological advancements in the non-magical

world, from the steam locomotive that provided fast and cheap land transportation, to telephones, mass implementation of electricity, the automobile, airplanes, radio, television and the computer. All in all, he was learning to love History and was looking forward to the coming term.

His time with Mrs. Langley was spent talking more about the scientific aspects of Botany. While he already knew that most plants had leaves, flowers, fruit, seeds, stems and roots, he hadn't learned much more. With Mrs. Langley, he learned about primary and secondary roots, root caps and even root hairs. He discovered there were many types of buds, nodes, and growth rings on stems. He even learned there were seven different parts to a leaf and how photosynthesis occurred.

While Professor Sprout hadn't gone into pollination much, although admittedly he didn't know what she covered after Second Year, Mrs. Langley spent time on the male and female reproductive organs in plants and generously ignored his blushes. Fortunately, the book had excellent and well documented illustrations that helped him memorize the various pieces.

He also learned there were four parts of the typical fruit and eight parts to a seed. Once he was able to correctly label all parts of a flower, stem, root, seed and fruit, she announced he was ready for the ninth grade class.

At the end of the intensive five-week session, Harry was fascinated with all he learned, a bit mentally exhausted, but eager for the Fall term.

OoOoOoOo

One week before the new term started, two major events occurred for Harry. The first was the reappearance of Elias Guerrero. Harry returned from his weekly Charms review with the elderly Adam Middleton. The man was a no-nonsense type of teacher, more like Professor McGonagall than Professor Flitwick, but he did smile at Harry at the start and completion of each theory review. Harry returned to Blair House to find his quiet room in major disorder.

The first thing that caught his eye was the chaos across the room. Two suitcases were open and half-emptied of clothes. The wardrobe

doors were open and half the drawers pulled out. A large glass cage was situated at the foot of the bed, filled with a rock, a leaning branch that led to several levels of rock shelves, plants and vines. A movement caught his eye, and he realized a two-foot long lizard was watching him. A noise from the bathroom drew his attention just as a medium-sized boy with caramel colored skin came out.

"Hey," the boy said. "You must be my new roommate." He saw Harry looking at the cage and frowned. "Xolotl isn't going to be a problem, is he?"

"No, I think he's wicked," smiled Harry. He held out a hand, "Harry Potter, just starting ninth grade here."

The other boy hesitated, examining him with suspicious black eyes and then slowly clasped his hand. "Elias Guerrero, I started here in seventh grade and am obviously entering ninth as well, else we wouldn't be rooming together."

He turned and began unpacking more clothes from the suitcase to the wardrobe, leaving Harry only a glimpse of his dark brown hair, royal blue t-shirt and black jeans. "Where are you from then?"

"I transferred from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this summer. I've spent the last few weeks revising to be sure I'm ready for the Fall term. What did you say your lizard's name was?"

"Xolotl," the other boy said briefly. "He's a cross between an iguana and an Egyptian fire lizard."

Harry sat on his bed and watched his new roommate unpack, wondering about the boy's suspicious attitude.

"Do you play a lot of music," Elias asked abruptly, turning to pin Harry with his dark eyes.

Harry blinked. "No, I don't have anything to play music with. At Hogwarts where I used to go, there was too much magic for non-magical things to work. From what Mr. Talbot said, there are more shields here."

"There are," Elias said grudgingly. He turned back to his unpacking and then asked over his shoulder, "You know that you're responsible

for keeping your side of the room clean, right? No dirty dishes piling up that stink up the room."

Harry wondered about the odd questions. "I wasn't planning on having anything in the rooms." He thought about the "trail mix" he had bought and amended, "except for snacks. I bought trail mix, but Hedwig stole most of it."

Elias glanced at him over his shoulder for a moment. "Hedwig?"

"My owl," he replied as he nodded towards her cage. "I've been leaving the window open at night so she could go hunt, but she'll let me know whether she wants to stay in the Owlery or here as the weather gets colder." He looked at the other boy. "You're OK with owls? She won't do anything to Xolotl, once we introduce them."

A small crash sounded in the glass cage and Harry saw the iguana had tipped a water bowl over onto the large rock on the bottom of the cage. Its skin turned red for a moment and then the water turned to steam. "Much better" it hissed with evident pleasure.

"You can talk," Harry exclaimed.

The lizard's head swung towards Harry and the tongue lashed out. "You sspeak? Even my Boy doess not sspeak."

"I'm used to speaking to sssnakes," Harry hissed. "I didn't know I could sspeak to iquanass or lizardss."

"I am a cousin to the sssnake," the lizard replied. It regarded Harry as its tongue tasted the air. "You will tell my Boy that the trip did not bother me, but I am pleassed to be back in his room".

Harry looked at his roommate, not surprised to see the other boy's dark eyes were widened in amazement as they moved between him and his pet.

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. Was he about to be ostracized for being a parselmouth again? "Xolotl said to tell you that the trip did not bother him, but that he's happy to be back in this room."

"You...you can understand him?"

Harry nodded as he added, "I usually only speak to snakes. But Xolotl says he's a cousin to the snake."

Elias looked at the iguana for a long moment and then back at Harry as he began to fire rapid questions at him. "Ask him if he's OK with his name or if he has another. No, ask him if he likes being with me or if he wants to be elsewhere. Does he want to be free?" The boy's voice cracked a bit as he asked the last question.

"Eliass calls you Xolotl, but wantss to know if you have another name he sshould call you. He alssso wantss to know if you like being with him or would you prefer being elsssewhere, even free?"

The iguana's head swung to look unblinkingly at Elias. After a long moment, he replied "He isss my Boy. I have no where elsse I choosse to be. I have no name other than Xolotl."

Harry grinned and looked at his roommate. "Apparently Xolotl has no other name and is quite possessive of you as you are HIS Boy...I could almost hear the capital B. He doesn't want to be anyplace else."

Another hiss from the cage made Harry burst out laughing. At Elias' curious look he said "He instructed me to tell you that he wants sugar peas more often and that he also likes the cooked noodles you give him sometimes."

Elias gave him a broad grin exposing straight white teeth against his caramel colored skin. "Harry, mi amigo, I think this is the start of a beautiful friendship."

OoOoOoOo

Two weeks after his original appointment with Healer Masuto, Harry received a brief note saying that the curse specialists would be there in another week, deliberately coming on a Tuesday afternoon to avoid his review sessions. Although offered, he declined having Mr. Talbot or Ms. Sadler accompany him. He was thirteen after all!

The day of the appointment, he was too nervous to eat lunch after his Transfiguration review, so wandered around out in the sunshine until it was time to go to the Clinic. Healer Masuto introduced a tall

tanned man as Shaman Takoda Black Elk of the Sioux Nation and a petite curly-haired woman as Curse Specialist Stephanie Margrave.

Healer Masuto led him to one of the examining rooms, commenting as they walked that both Shaman Black Elk and Curse Specialist Margrave had seen his diagnostic results, but wanted to run some tests themselves. Shaman Black Elk's magic was soft and warm; it surrounded, cushioned and comforted him. Curse Specialist Margrave's spells tickled and tingled under his skin, but were not uncomfortable.

They asked him to read or work on his homework while they discussed the results. An hour later, his Transfiguration homework was mostly complete when Healer Masuto led him back into his office. Once all of them were seated, the middle-aged Healer smiled briefly at the young teen.

"Harry, what we believe you have is more than a curse scar created by Dark magic. Instead, it is more of a parasitic leech of some kind." Harry's face twisted in disgust, but he clamped his lips shut to hear the rest. "Something is drawing upon your life energy and your magic to power or feed something else. Now you told me that it was created when the Avada Kadevra curse rebounded?"

Harry nodded, "Yes sir. I'm told it rebounded to Voldemort and destroyed him, but not his spirit. In fact, the spirit possessed one of my teachers in my first year at Hogwarts."

Black Elk's dark eyes lit up with interest at that and his deep voice asked, "Did you feel anything in the scar when that particular teacher was nearby?"

"Yes sir, it hurt. Near the end of the year, he tried to kill me, but whatever protection my mother gave me at her death wouldn't let him touch me. He burned up and the spirit fled."

"That's it then," said Ms. Margrave quietly. "The dark magic sustained in the scar created a link between this spirit and Harry, and the spirit has been draining Harry to sustain itself."

Harry grimaced in revulsion again. "Can you get rid of it? Or can you stop it from getting anything from me?"

Shaman Black Elk rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "There is a method among my people." He waved his hand and a silencing spell separated the three adults from Harry for a few minutes. He watched their lips moving but couldn't figure out what they were saying. He fidgeted waiting for them to finish the conversation.

With nods of agreement, the silencing spell dropped. "Harry, we believe the least harmful and least painful option will be to transfer the parasitic leech to another living object; something with a complex enough intelligence and magic to support the transfer until it is completed. Give us a few days and we'll schedule the procedure."

The next day, Curse Breaker Margrave let Healer Masuto know they had a candidate for the transfer, so the three adults met to discuss it. "I think I mentioned that my Great Aunt Sophie lives in Stillwater? Well, it was a pleasure to come here, not only because of the odd nature of the boy's curse scar but also because I could stay with her and catch up. She lives alone except for her three kneazels. Last night, as I explained to her what we had found, her oldest kneazel Ceres sat up in my Aunt's lap when I mentioned that we needed to transfer the leech to help the boy. She turned and looked at Aunt Sophie, batted her paw at my Aunt and then gave the most demanding yowl. She continued until Aunt Sophie asked if she was volunteering to accept the parasite. Ceres then rumbled and lay back down again. Aunt Sophie said that Ceres is one of the oldest kneazels she's ever seen, her joints ache with arthritis and she has little appetite any more. She's quite certain that Ceres has decided that this will give her death meaning."

"A kneazel has the intelligence and the magic needed to ground the leech" said Black Elk thoughtfully. "It is a noble act."

Harry received word to return to the Clinic on Thursday afternoon after his review sessions. Once there, Healer Masuto brought him into a treatment room that was larger than the examining room. Harry lay down on one wheeled stretcher and was surprised to see an elderly kneazel on a second gurney.

"This is Ceres," the petite curse breaker said stroking the kneazel. "She volunteered to accept the transfer."

"She did," asked Harry in amazement. Ceres purred in a rumbling sound next to him. "Thank you, Ceres", he said quietly. "I can never repay you." The kneazel purred louder.

"Harry, I want you to drink this sleeping draught," Healer Masuto said, handing him a vial. Harry drank it quickly, grimacing at the taste. Once the boy fell asleep, the Healer also cast a Stupefy on him. All three specialists agreed it would be better for the young teen.

Over the course of the next hour, they successfully transferred the parasite to the kneazel, although the leech fought against them. Its magical roots were buried deep within the boy's psyche and wrapped around his magical core, but they slowly and carefully unwound its tendrils until they could complete the transfer with one great effort.

Harry drifted up through the darkness as a voice quietly but authoritatively said "Harry, wake up now. Come on, Harry. Wake up. Open your eyes."

It seemed like a herculean effort, but he finally forced his eyes open to see the Asian Healer beside him casting diagnostic spells. Shaman Black Elk and Ms. Margrave were at the foot of his bed. "Did it work" he whispered, half afraid that it hadn't.

Masuto smiled at him. "Yes Harry, the transfer was complete. How do you feel?"

Harry thought about it and then smiled. "I feel...lighter. Like there was something weighing me down that's gone." He realized he was in a different room than where the transfer had occurred. "How's Ceres?"

Ms. Margrave said softly, "Ceres accepted the transfer and then went to sleep. She died peacefully several minutes later." At Harry's look of horror, she said quickly, "She was very old, Harry. She was ready to die. We think that was why she volunteered for the transfer."

"A very generous and noble act" agreed the Shaman. He fixed black eyes on the young teen. "You will live a life that reflects her sacrifice, yes?"

"Yes sir," Harry said quietly, humbled by the act of the elderly kneazel. "I will try."

"Good, that is the most one can attempt."

Harry stayed in the Clinic overnight to ensure there were no side effects from the procedure. Ms. Sadler came to visit him, and promised to tell Hedwig that he was all right. After she left him, she stopped in the Healer's office.

"Taguchi, I have a question", she said to her close friend. "Why do you suppose that no Healer ever investigated or treated Harry before?"

Her friend poured them both tea and then sipped his reflectively. "From what I understand with my few conversations with Harry, he never saw a Healer before he went to Hogwarts. At the school, they are staffed with a mediwitch, not a full healer. Perhaps her scans were only for specific injuries? I know he wasn't given nutrient potions for the two years he was there, and a standard exam would have shown the effects of malnutrition." They both shook their heads, not certain how this one boy could have slipped through the cracks.

Harry awoke full of energy the following morning and was released after another full scan by Healer Masuto. Over the next week, he found it easier to focus, had a better memory and could sustain spell casting for longer periods without tiring. Even his scar began to fade from the angry red mark to a thin white line.

OoOoOoOo

At the first staff meeting before the new term, Albus Dumbledore smiled benevolently at the teachers. Minerva had been a bit standoffish since his return, but he understood the stress his Deputy Headmistress went through as a new year began. He still hadn't found the top of his desk under the piles of mail, reports newspapers and journals that he still had to work through. After allowing the teachers a few minutes to discuss their holidays, he called the meeting to order. They discussed the coming year, what prefects would patrol when, as well as what new equipment needed to be purchased.

"I'm going to need new several new cauldrons as well as reinforced tables, Albus. Between Longbottom's penchant for blowing up his cauldrons, and Potter's pathetic attempts, it's amazing I still have a classroom at all."

Minerva smiled thinly at the taciturn Potions Master and said, "Then you will be pleased to learn that half of your problem is gone this year, Severus."

Albus frowned slightly at his Deputy Headmistress. "What do you mean Minerva?"

"Mr. Potter will not be returning to Hogwarts this Term. He transferred to another school." She waited for the exclamations to die down from the other staff members before adding, "I left his letter on your desk, Albus."

An hour later, Privet Drive had an unusual visitor who bore a long silver beard and wore a suit that was in style fifty years earlier. He tapped at Number 4 and smiled kindly at Petunia Dursley when she opened the door. Before he could speak, she whispered furiously "He's not here! He went to another school and won't be returning!" She attempted to close the door, but it wouldn't move.

"May I come in please, Petunia," the old man said firmly making it a demand instead of a request. At her automatic refusal he added, "Very well, if you don't mind your neighbors hearing our discussion..." He was promptly pulled into the house and the door closed firmly behind him.

"The boy is gone!" she stated again.

"Yes, so you said. I simply wanted to make sure that he was all right at his new location. To what school did he transfer?"

"I have no idea," she stated grudgingly. "One freak school is like another, I'm sure. However, he said if the school didn't offer year-round classes, he would find alternative accommodations."

The warmth went out of the elderly blue eyes. "I see. When did your nephew leave?"

"I don't know," the thin lips spat at him. "Last month sometime. It's not as if we weren't glad to see the last of him. We never asked for him, but were forced to take him in, feed him, clothe him, and deal with his freakishness. We were glad to see the last of him."

"He was your nephew, your sister's son. You were his only family," Dumbledore uttered faintly, plainly shocked at Petunia's callous attitude. He extended his senses, ignoring the venom the woman was spewing. He closed his eyes as if in pain when he realized the blood wards had fully fallen. "Never mind, Petunia. What is done is done" he cut off the woman's invective.

Back at Hogwarts, the elderly wizard sat at his desk and wrote a letter to Harry Potter. He attached a tracking charm to it, to help him find the young boy.

OoOoOoOo

Harry and Elias were getting along much better. The former Gryffindor discovered that Elias had considered his last roommate an obnoxious jerk who played his music loudly, left his filthy clothes around and kept dirty dishes under the bed. He also attempted to hex Xolotl one day. Apparently, his parents either withdrew him from school or he was expelled, which was Elias' fervent hope.

Harry explained how his two-way mail box allowed mail to be rerouted to his mail service, which then filtered it and sent it to him instantly. Elias had seen how Harry got strange letters and solicitations several times a week, so when the British boy came into the room after his Potions session, he only said "Your mail box has been glowing all afternoon."

Harry opened the incoming mail side and was surprised to see not only three letters, but a small package as well. He withdrew them and looked at the first letter. A note was tied to it from Mr. Stillwater that said he had removed a tracking charm. He also mentioned that for an additional five galleons a year, he would also filter portkeys if Harry wanted, as they had forgotten to discuss those. Removing his note, Harry wasn't surprised to see the Hogwarts seal on the letter. He broke the seal, wondering if it was from Professor McGonagall or Professor Dumbledore.

Dear Harry,

I was surprised and disappointed to learn that you withdrew from Hogwarts without speaking to me or your Head of House. Your friends at Hogwarts as well as the Weasleys and Miss Granger are very worried about you and miss you. Poor Oliver Wood will be devastated at having lost his prize seeker.

I'm certain that whatever concerns caused you to decide to take such a drastic step as to remove yourself from your friends and school can be resolved. Please let Professor McGonagall or I know your location, so that we can come and discuss it with you. As a consequence of the shade of Voldemort still on the loose, you must realize that you need to be in a place of safety.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Headmaster Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Order of Merlin, First Class; Chief Warlock, Wizengamot; Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards

Emerald green eyes narrowed as he read the Headmaster's letter and his hands clenched, wrinkling the parchment. Disappointed was he? Was that supposed to make Harry tuck his tail between his legs and come slinking back? And just how stupid did he think Harry was with those manipulative comments about Quidditch?

"Oh yes, Headmaster, you're certain whatever concerns can be resolved...as if I don't have legitimate reasons and my decision was just some kid's prank." He growled and pulled paper and pen towards him, making sure his thesaurus was close to help him select his words.

Headmaster Albus Dumbledore

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Dear Headmaster Dumbledore,

My decision to leave Hogwarts is final. I enrolled in a new school with my legal guardian's approval, and my relatives were delighted to see the last of me.

Perhaps you do not recall, but I barely survived five murder attempts over the past two years. My concern about my safety is not limited to those attacks, but also to a basic lack of faith in Hogwarts to keep its students safe in addition to unease over your unwarranted interest in my life.

Ten years ago, I learned that I was left like a newspaper on my relative's doorstep by you immediately after my parent's deaths. For the next decade, I was left ignorant of the wizarding world and unaware of my heritage, and I have since learned that it was on your instructions. And while I can appreciate the mail ward prior to Hogwarts, it should have been removed or at least revealed once I entered the wizarding world.

After I arrived at Hogwarts, it was to discover that you had hired a possessed teacher. When I was subsequently involved in his death, I received no counseling, but was returned to the same abusive relatives you abandoned me to ten years earlier.

In my second year, not a single staff member recognized that a student was possessed and only a twelve year old girl identified that a basilisk was loose in the school. Even after Colin Creevey was petrified, you kept the school open, endangering the rest of the students. In the end, I faced the basilisk and Riddle's ghost by myself and nearly died. Again, no counseling was offered; instead I was forced back to my abusive relatives yet once more.

I spent the summer researching new schools and found that there are many more options that I was led to believe. I am happy in my new school. To my surprise, not a single staff member has insulted or ridiculed me, nor did they go to an opposite extreme because I'm the "boy-who-lived". None of them put tracking charms on me or my mail. I'm just Harry-the-new-student here.

I wrote my Hogwarts friends, so they know of my decision and aren't quite as worried about me as you implied. Fortunately, my true friends care more about my safety than Quidditch.

My decision to withdraw from Hogwarts is final.

Sincerely,

Harry James Potter

Cc: Deputy Headmaster Minerva McGonagall

Once he wrote the letter and duplicated the letter for his former Head of House, he felt much better. Now the old man would understand that his move was irrevocable. There was no reason to try to chase down one student out of hundreds whose guardians had given him permission to change schools and who had legitimate concerns for his safety.

With a nod of satisfaction, he turned to the letter from Ron. He opened the envelope and read the messy scrawl quickly.

Harry,

I can't believe that you just up and left Hogwarts without saying anything! I thought we were best friends. How could you just leave like that? Well, I guess you decided our friendship wasn't that important, huh?

Sure, I'll tell my folks and brothers what you said. You should probably write my Mum or else she'll go spare with worry.

Best of luck, I guess.

Ron

Harry sighed after finishing his best friend's letter. He had asked for his support, but only received hurt feelings. Oh well, he supposed he should write a letter to Mrs. Weasley; she had been very kind in letting him stay last summer and had sent him two hand-made sweaters.

He wrote a quick note to Mrs. Weasley, sharing some of the reasons that he left. He almost added the part about finding a year-round program, but decided to leave that out just in case someone tried to track him down. He made sure to thank her enthusiastically for the Christmas presents and allowing him to stay at the Burrow after the twins and Ron rescued him.

He turned to Hermione's letter and hoped it was more understanding.

Dear Harry,

I was amazed to receive your letter and learn that you left Hogwarts without talking to anyone, although I'm impressed that you made a list to help you with the decision. My original intent in this letter was to convince you to return, but then I thought about what you said – about five murder attempts in two years – and have to admit that I wouldn't want to return either. Even so, I want to believe that Professor Dumbledore has your best interests at heart. Have you spoken to him about this decision? He's one of the greatest wizards who ever lived after all.

What can you tell me all about your new school? How did you find it? What is the difference in tuition? What courses do they offer that Hogwarts doesn't? Did you have to interview with them? Did Hogwarts send your records or did you get accepted by standing entrance exams?

I look forward to hearing about your classes, teachers and classmates soon. In the meantime, I'm enclosing a homework planner I bought for your birthday. I got one for Ron and myself as well and was going to coordinate our homework, but hope it works for you at your new school. Happy Birthday!

Love,

Hermione

A wry grin lit his face as he read his friend's letter. Of course, Dumbledore didn't interfere in her life, so she didn't understand why he hadn't talked to the great wizard before making his decision. Even so, she supported him. He chuckled warmly as the questions spilled across the page. He wouldn't be surprised if she wasn't researching alternate schools right now to make sure she was attending the best choice. He had to suppress a chuckle at the birthday gift, but figured he would give it a try.

He pulled out his notes from his search of schools and wrote a detailed letter back, giving her information about the many options beyond Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. He knew she would be impressed with the schools that had both muggle and magical classes, and pointed out how those schools could help the student find a career in either world.

He chewed on his pen for a moment before adding another comment.

Please don't share this information with any of the Hogwarts professors, Hermione. I mentioned in my first letter that I found some odd things going on in my life; more than I knew about before. Well, I found out that the Headmaster is the one that left me with the Dursleys. He also instructed a Squib that babysat me not to tell me anything about the wizarding world. I was left totally unprepared at his orders. In addition, there was a mail ward that prevented mail from reaching me from anyone other than the Ministry, Hogwarts or friends. That's how he kept me ignorant of being a celebrity to the wizarding world. Even worse, there were two tracking charms on me without my knowledge or permission.

I'll let you know more about my classes in a week or two. I spent the last few weeks working with my new teachers on remedial lessons or revision sessions to be ready for the fall term. I guess I'm not bad at the practical side of classes, but light on the theory. Imagine that.

He knew she would get a grin out of that. She always told him he needed to understand why he was doing what he was doing, whether it was the wand motions or the pronunciation or reasons why they studied what they studied.

I have to say that my new Potions Master is brilliant. I've learned more about Potions in the last few weeks than I did in the last two years with Snape. He teaches about the role of each ingredient, the impact of heat, stirring and the interaction between ingredients. I'm actually starting to like Potions now. Can you believe that?

I'll write again soon,

Harry

He put the four letters in the outgoing side of the mail box and watched the flash that indicated they had been sent.

"Let's go to dinner, Harry" Elias said once his friend had completed his mail. "I'm starving!"

"OK, just a moment." Harry quickly made a note to write back to Mr. Stillwater about port keys and then joined Elias at the door. "I hope they have pizza on the menu tonight."

Elias snickered and teased Harry about his latest obsession as the two boys hurried down to the dining room.

Chapter 6 – Write Soon

Albus Dumbledore ambled into the staff room at Hogwarts, and a look of relief briefly crossed his face when he saw most of the teachers already assembled for the first staff meeting of the new term. After seeing that Harry Potter's letter was copied to Minerva, he had been avoiding the woman all afternoon. He was certain that she wouldn't make a scene in front of the other professors and he was safe for a few more hours.

His relief was short-lived when a furious Minerva McGonagall stalked into the room a minute later and spied the Headmaster as her rarely heard brogue demonstrated her ire. "Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, what did ye do to that puir bairn!" The other staff members quietly picked up their tea cups and pushed away from the table, not wanting to gain the attention of the seething Deputy Headmistress or get in her way.

Albus put on his best grandfatherly face, and let his aura glow as the Scotswoman reached him and threw a letter down in front of him. "Now Minerva," he began soothingly.

"Dinna be trying that approach with me, Albus" she spat at the elderly wizard, ignoring his visible aura. Several feet away, Severus Snape smirked visibly at the old tabby hissing at the Headmaster. "Five murder attempts in two years! Mail wards left illegally on the boy! Did ye even think to send the puir boy to a mind healer after all those ordeals? Nay, ye dinna! Ye continued to send him back to an abusive family!"

The rest of the staff looked at the irate woman in shock. One of their children was sent to an abusive home? How could they have missed that? And murder attempts? Inconceivable!

Albus groaned mentally as all eyes turned to him. This was going to be a very long staff meeting.

OoOoOoOo

Pansy Parkinson slipped back into the compartment and allowed a small smirk to escape as she sat down across from Draco Malfoy, who merely raised an imperious eyebrow at her. When he didn't ask

any questions, she huffed and crossed her arms across her chest and looked out the window.

Blaise Zabini rolled his eyes at the blonde teen and turned to Pansy. "You look like you found some delicious gossip while you were out, Pansy. Would you care to share?"

She turned her head and opened her mouth as if to speak, before she saw Draco Malfoy's smirk. She smiled sweetly to Blaise and simpered "Knowledge is power, Blaise. Why should I share something with no benefit to me?"

He ran through a list of what to offer, from copying homework to helping with some retaliation before settling on the easiest. "Did I mention, my dear Pansy, that I brought cioccolato coperto fragile back from Italia?" He smiled enticingly at her as her eyes sparked their interest. "I remembered how much you like them." They both knew he had her; now it was only a matter of the quantity.

"Well, perhaps for half a dozen, I might share my news."

"They are larger than normal. Perhaps three?"

The bargain made, Pansy smirked "Harry Potter isn't on the train and isn't expected to be at Hogwarts this year."

Draco forgot himself enough to lean forward. "What!"

A triumphant smile lit the Slytherin girl's face. "The little Weaselette was speaking to her loony Ravenclaw friend. According to her, he applied to and left for another school over the summer. He didn't tell anyone in advance. Her family didn't know until Potter wrote the Weasel and the Mudblood after the fact."

Blaise reached into his new bottomless bag and felt for the box of chocolates and handed it to her, his eyes on Draco.

The blonde leaned back on his seat and closed his eyes. "Well, well, well" he murmured, "What are you doing Scarhead?" His father would be interested in this news. After Potter tricked him into freeing the house elf, he had been livid with rage at the Gryffindor. Perhaps now that the prat wasn't under Dumbledore's protection, his father could exact some vengeance.

Students streamed into the Great Hall and it was easy to spot the redheads in the group. With ease of practice, Malfoy slipped through the crowds that mostly parted as the two large boys in front of him pushed their way through.

Crabbe roughly knocked the Gryffindor who turned with a scowl as Malfoy spoke in his most condescending and irritating voice to his quarry. "Careful Weasel, your Golden Boy isn't here to protect you this year. Ran away sniveling in fear, did he? His true colors finally showed, apparently."

Ronald Weasley's hands curled into fists as he glared at the Slytherin, his face flushing an unbecoming red. He spluttered in rage, unable to form a coherent response which made Malfoy curl his lip in a derisive sneer.

A dreamy voice spoke from Malfoy's left, "Who is the more foolish; the one who takes the initiative to preserve and grow his power or the one who carelessly returns to a place where one's safety and power can be diminished?" Malfoy turned a frown on Luna Lovegood as she smiled absentmindedly at him and then wandered into the Great Hall, leaving him speechless. Potter wasn't capable of that type of premeditated planning, was he?

More than his owl left Hogwarts that night with the news that Harry James Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived hadn't returned to Hogwarts for his Third Year.

OoOoOoOo

Harry Potter smiled at the letter from Molly Weasley. As expected, she admonished him for making such a decision without an adult (of whom she approved was the unstated phrase), but then thanked him for his concern about Ginny possibly needing counseling after the traumatic events of the previous year. She dismissed his thanks for the jumpers and allowing him to stay at the Burrow, and invited him to return for the holidays and during the summer.

With a warm feeling inside, he laid that letter aside and turned to the next. He didn't recognize the seal, but since it passed the filters, he wasn't concerned.

Dear Harry,

Thank you very much for the "Beginning Potions" book from your new school. I can see what you meant about how it filled in so many gaps that Snape never explained. It made so much sense when I could look at it from how the ingredients interacted with one another. Perhaps I'll even be able to keep from exploding a cauldron this term. One can dream, right?

I was sorry to read that you've chosen a new school, but certainly understand your reasons. If it weren't a tradition for the Longbottoms to attend Hogwarts, I might have asked Gran about it myself. However, she wants me to experience all that my Father did, so it's Hogwarts for me.

If your time permits, I would be interested in knowing how you are doing and how you enjoy your classes at your new school. Perhaps you wouldn't mind hearing from me from time to time?

Best wishes,

Neville Longbottom

He chuckled as he thought about Snape's disbelief if Neville's cauldrons became safe. He reread the letter and paused at the last paragraph. Poor Neville was used to being overlooked, wasn't he? He hadn't been a very good friend to his dorm mate if he didn't think Harry wanted to hear from him. He would have to be sure to write the other boy once a month or so.

His thoughtful expression turned into a scowl as he recognized the Hogwarts seal and the handwriting on the next letter. With a growl he set it aside, but his bad mood couldn't last as the next letter was from Hermione.

Dear Harry,

Your revision classes sounded exciting! You learned so much in such a short time. I envy you that one-on-one time with your new professors. Congratulations on finishing successfully and in time for your new term. You get to start a week before us!

I'm thrilled that you're going to catch up on Arithmancy, although I was surprised it started in their First Year. I'll be starting that class myself this year and would love to learn how the two schools approach it to see the similarities and disparities in the teaching methods.

How do you feel sharing a room with only one other boy? It must be much quieter than the dormitories at Hogwarts. I wouldn't mind not having to listen to Lavender and Parvati some days. Elias sounds very nice and his mixed iquana-fire lizard pet seems to be amusing. I'm so sorry that he climbed up on your broom and caused so much burn damage! Does it still fly?

We went to Diagon Alley yesterday for the term's supplies and there were a number of Aurors (those are the wizarding law enforcement) visible on the street. Apparently, a mass murderer escaped from Azkaban, the wizarding prison. It's supposed to be escape-proof, and no one knows how it happened. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley refused to talk about it, but held some whispered conversations and kept us away from the Daily Prophet for some reason, but we could hear everyone else gossiping about it.

I'm sorry to say that Ron is still irritated with you not sharing your decision to leave in advance, but he'll come around. The twins seem to think it's a wonderful prank on the entire school, and sent you their congratulations.

It's back to school tomorrow, so I'll write you again after we're settled in again.

Your friend,

Hermione

He smiled at his brainy friend. Only she would be jealous of a five-week crash course in all of his lessons and starting school a week early. He was sorry to read that Ron still was being a prat, but it wasn't too surprising after his actions when he learned that Harry was a parselmouth plus all of the Heir of Slytherin accusations last year. But of course the twins would approve of pranking the entire school.

He thought about leaving Dumbledore's letter unopened, but decided that would be too babyish. He was thirteen now after all! He broke the seal and scanned the contents.

Dear Harry,

I am sorry that you believe Hogwarts is unsafe for you. Please rest assured that the staff and I care deeply about the wellbeing of each and every student. I must admit that I bear the burden of not thinking about a need for counseling. Mind healers are a relatively new profession, but you are correct that it should have been offered. Professor McGonagall expressed similar views quite fervently.

Regarding the mail wards, I set them immediately after your parent's deaths in an effort to keep Voldemort's followers from trying to finish what he had started. Over the years, I simply forgot that I had set them or would have removed them once you arrived at Hogwarts. In the same way, the tracking charms were for your safety in case you were captured or injured. All of my actions were made because I wanted to keep you safe.

The new term begins in a few days. We have a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher whom I am certain you would have enjoyed. Professor Remus Lupin was a friend of your father's throughout their school years and beyond. I'm sure he would be willing to share some stories of their time together should you be interested.

Although you stated that your decision is final, please know that your place at Hogwarts will always be kept open and that you are welcome back at any time. If you do not object, I would like to discuss your safety with your school's Headmaster.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Headmaster Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Order of Merlin, First Class; Chief Warlock, Wizengamot; Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards

Harry read the letter several times. The old man was sorry that Harry felt the school was unsafe, but implied that it wasn't unsafe

after everything that had happened! He never even acknowledged the five murder attempts. At least he admitted he should have offered counseling. The dark-haired boy reread the comments about Professor Remus Lupin. He had to admit he was tempted to write the man and ask about what his father was like growing up. The comments about speaking to Principal Graham he totally ignored. He wasn't about to tell that meddling old man where he was.

OoOoOoOo

After breakfast on the first day of classes, Professor McGonagall passed out everyone's schedules. She paused after handing Ron and Hermione their schedules and said in a disapproving tone, "The Headmaster would like a few words with you immediately after breakfast. The password is 'Liquorice Sticks'." She hesitated before adding, "You are not required to speak to him about anything not school related." With that peculiar comment, she turned away and continued passing out schedules.

Ron looked after their Head of House with confusion. "What was that about," he asked Hermione.

The bushy-haired girl shook her head. "I'm not sure, but I see Professor Dumbledore has left the staff tables, so we may as well go to his office now." Her face was set in the look she had when she was trying to figure out a puzzle, so Ron kept quiet on the walk to the Headmaster's office.

"Come in, come in," the elderly wizard's voice said jovially as they reached up to knock on his door. With a shrug, Ron opened the door and the two entered the Headmaster's office. "Have a seat, please. I'll only take a few minutes of your time," Dumbledore said in a friendly voice.

The two sat and looked at him uncomfortably. "We're not in trouble, are we Professor" asked Ron hesitantly.

"Not that I'm aware of, Mr. Weasley," answered the elderly man with a smile. "Should you be?"

The red-head shook his head vigorously. "No sir, we've only just arrived!"

"Well in that case, no one is in trouble. I just wanted to see how you were doing without young Mr. Potter with you. We've all been worried about him."

Ron immediately scowled at the thought of his former best friend and his voice was petulant as he said, "We haven't given too much thought to him. He just upped and went elsewhere, didn't he? Not as if we meant much to him."

Hermione immediately frowned at her friend. "Now Ron, that's not fair. It's not like you told either of us that you were going to Egypt until it was a 'fait accompli' either."

"Huh? Fate what?"

"An accomplished fact; a done deal. You didn't tell us, so you have no right to get upset that he didn't tell you something either."

Albus interrupted the argument with his best grandfatherly voice, "Yes, every friendship has a few bumps along the way. How is Mr. Potter getting along at his new school?"

Hermione turned a smile on the Headmaster. "Very well sir. He spent five weeks in intensive revision, primarily in Potions, History and Herbology and started his classes at the end of August. He said it was tiring, but rewarding."

"How did his new professor compare to Professor Snape? I know he struggled in that class." He ignored Ron's muttered "Everyone but the snakes have trouble with the git."

Hermione was delighted to share the new information Harry had learned. Perhaps the Headmaster could help Professor Snape improve his teaching skills. "Harry bought their first two year books and was amazed at how much information they contained about potion ingredients and how they react to each other, the reasons why the number of stirs affects a potion, the differences the temperature makes and such. He's really looking forward to this year's class."

After a few more questions, the Headmaster thanked them and sent them on their way to class with a note excusing their tardiness. Once the children were gone, he wrote down several observations.

He preferred not to have to use Legilimens on the children, but sometimes it was the only way to get the pertinent information. In this situation, while neither child had the name of the school, the Granger girl had narrowed it down to schools that offered both muggle and wizarding classes, as well as year-round classes. He should be able to track the boy down with that knowledge.

OoOoOoOo

Ms. Sadler left Principal Graham's office with a pensive look. The Principal had held an interesting discussion with the school's attorneys about young Harry Potter. Those attorneys suggested that the boy retain his own legal counsel to look after his interests, especially as his current legal guardians had signed a blank form approving of a change of guardianship. Once back in her classroom, she wrote a quick note, asking Harry to meet her before dinner and summoned a house elf to deliver it.

She wasn't surprised when later that afternoon she heard a very hesitant knock on her Blair House office door and saw the black-haired boy looking at her anxiously from under his bangs. "Come in, Harry. Please have a seat." She quickly cast a privacy charm, which allowed the door to stay open but maintained the confidentiality of the discussion.

"Yes ma'am," the young teen said quietly. "Have I done something wrong, Ms. Sadler," he asked uncertainly.

She smiled warmly at him and shook her head. "Not at all, Harry. I just wanted to speak to you privately about something that may be to your benefit."

Harry relaxed slightly in the seat, glad that none of the teachers had complained about him in his first week of regular classes.

"Harry, when you first applied, your guardians had signed their approval for you to attend St. Croix Academy as a year-round student." She paused for him to nod his head cautiously. "I believe you also mentioned to Mr. Talbot that they were open to considering a change in guardianship."

Harry wasn't certain where this conversation was going, but responded readily, "Yes ma'am. They signed an approval in advance if I find someone I want to ask."

Christina Sadler phrased her comments carefully to avoid future accusations or repercussions. "The laws in the United States and the United Kingdom may be different. Here in the States, we usually retain attorneys to review and evaluate our cases as well as to protect our rights and interests." She met his eyes and waited for his response.

Harry opened his mouth to say "yes ma'am" politely and then paused to consider her words. Was she advising him to find a solicitor? Had Dumbledore tried to force his return? But she hadn't mentioned anything other than the guardianship. He opened his mouth again and asked, "How does a young teen find an attorney, Ms. Sadler?"

"The Yellow Pages of the telephone book will have advertisements for different legal firms as well as lawyer referral services. It's just something to think about, Harry. It never hurts to be prepared." She waited for the boy to nod warily and then smiled again, and dropped the privacy wards. "You must be hungry. Let's go to dinner."

In the Common Room after dinner, before starting homework with some of his year group, Harry found a telephone book and started looking through the legal advertisements. He was interrupted by an amused "Going to sue someone, Harry?" from Elias.

Harry gave a half-hearted grin to his roommate and hissed a hello to Xolotl, who was riding on the boy's shoulders. The lizard had begun joining them for their joint homework time, and Harry translated his haughty comments to the amusement of the rest of the group.

"I was just curious about finding a solicitor...err, I mean an attorney to represent my interests," he began. "But I don't know anything about it."

Rich Lovell nodded in approval. "Considering you are a celebrity as the only known survivor of a killing curse, it would be a sensible measure." At Harry's look of surprise, the boy admitted, "You are mentioned in some of the History books Harry, even over here."

Elias opened the Transfiguration text book and his notebook as he said, "My cousin Miguel and his wife are both attorneys. He works in contract law, but she's a family attorney. I could write them if you are interested. If neither of them can help, they could probably recommend someone."

Harry gave the boy a grateful smile. "Would you? Please? There are too many firms and names for me to choose from here." With the promise of future help, they turned to the homework Mr. Latham had given them.

Three days later, Harry had a letter from Anarosa Diaz. She offered him one free 60-minute meeting to see if they would suit one another. If he agreed, she was going to be in St. Paul the following weekend and would be happy to come to the Academy on a Saturday morning to meet with him. Elias pointed out that he couldn't go wrong with a free on-campus meeting, and he quickly agreed to it.

Several days later, Harry met Mrs. Anarosa Diaz on a Saturday morning. The thirty-something woman arrived in a tailored black pantsuit with a crisp white shirt under it. Her dark hair was pulled back, showing her high cheek bones and deep brown eyes. With Ms. Sadler's permission, they used her office for their discussion, and Mrs. Diaz cast several quick privacy spells.

With a nod of satisfaction, she gave him a small smile. "Now Mr. Potter, let's talk about the type of legal representation you might need." She pulled out a folder and a pad of paper as she spoke.

"Yes ma'am, thank you for coming." At her nod, he continued, "I'm looking for whatever representation is needed to keep me safe. I'm considered a celebrity in my world because of this," he paused to shift his bangs away from his scar. "I found out that my former Headmaster took much too much interest in my life before I ever went to Hogwarts. He had a mail ward on me and tracking charms. And at Hogwarts.."

He paused as the woman held up her left hand as her right was busy writing. "Would you back up a bit please, Mr. Potter. Tell me what you know about how you gained your scar."

Harry nodded and started over. "My parents were killed on Halloween in 1981 by the dark wizard Voldemort. I lived through the attack, and everyone says I survived the killing curse and somehow killed him. However, I think my parents did something that saved me. Anyway, Voldemort turned into a spirit and I was left with my Mum's sister and her family."

"By whom?" asked Mrs. Diaz.

"Well, I learned only this year that it was the Headmaster of my old school, Professor Albus Dumbledore. And he left me on the doorstep in a basket without even talking to my Aunt. They didn't want me; they considered me a freak and a burden."

Her eyes flicked quickly to his as she asked, "Did they actually say so, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes ma'am, almost every day. In fact, I didn't even realize my name was Harry until it was time for primary school. They almost always called me 'boy'." He watched her pen fly across the page and waited for her to nod again.

"I didn't know I was a wizard; I only knew I did 'freaky' things that made my relatives angry. My Aunt and Uncle told me my parents had died drunk in a car crash. They tried to keep me from getting my Hogwarts letter, but they kept coming, more and more all the time no matter where we went. Eventually, Hagrid hand-delivered it on my birthday."

"Hagrid?" asked the attorney.

"Yes ma'am, Rubeus Hagrid, he's the Keeper of the Keys and Grounds of Hogwarts."

"Does he normally deliver letters to the students from non-magical families?"

Harry paused and then shrugged. "I know my friend Hermione was visited by Professor McGonagall, but I don't know about the others."

"That's fine, go on Mr. Potter."

"At Hogwarts, I loved learning magic and playing Quidditch, but it just wasn't safe. A mountain troll got loose in the school my first year, my broom was hexed in a Quidditch match and I almost fell off, I was attacked by something in the Forest, and then by the three-headed dog inside the school, and finally Professor Quirrell tried to kill me, but he was possessed by Voldemort. He died when I touched him. He burned up and crumbled into dust."

He watched her pen flying across the page. "Ma'am, I made a copy of the lists I made to help me decide what to do. Would you like that before we go further?"

She gave him a warm smile. "Yes, thank you, Mr. Potter." He pulled out the notebook and the copied pages and passed them to her.

"What does this mean, 'cupboard under the stairs' under the Dursleys?" Her eyes were fixed on the page as she waited for him to reply.

"Well, I slept in the cupboard under the stairs until my Hogwarts letter, and then they moved me into my cousin's second bedroom because they thought someone was watching them."

"I see. And these two? 'Scraps for food' and 'forced to work long days'?"

Harry hunched his shoulders and slumped in the chair. "Well...I had to earn my food, didn't I? I did most of the cooking, and laundry, and cleaning, and yard work. I wasn't usually allowed to eat until everyone else had their fill so it usually wasn't much, and if I did anything wrong with the chores...or anything 'freaky'...then I didn't eat at all."

Over the course of the next hour, Mrs. Diaz asked him dozens of questions. After she was done, she re-visited some of the topics and asked even more questions, sometimes asking the same one in multiple ways. She learned that he did have the funds for a retainer, although she had mentioned something about 'pro bono' work as well.

"Mr. Potter, if you are comfortable working with me, I would be happy to accept you as a client. I will need to research more into the laws of the United Kingdom, but if your relatives are willing to

relinquish their guardianship rights, then perhaps we should speak more about the alternatives. Perhaps we should discuss emancipation in addition. In addition, I will endeavor to gain as much information as possible about your parents, their estate, whether they left a will and if so, was it executed.

The voice of a very angry woman filled the hotel room that night as she spoke to her husband over the telephone. "Miguel, if I find most of what my young client told me is true, it's outrageous! It will be the scandal of the decade if it comes to light. In addition to everything else, I picked up some British papers and learned that the man who betrayed his parents was a mass murderer who escaped from prison this summer! I need to find out more about that to determine whether additional safety precautions are necessary. I will draft a letter to the Academy's law firm tomorrow."

A week later, Harry received another visit from Mrs. Diaz, who told him to call her Anarosa. "Harry, the man who was imprisoned for mass murder after betraying your parents to the dark wizard was a man named Sirius Black. It turns out that he was also named your guardian by your parents. I asked for the transcripts of his trial and learned that he never received one, but was sent to prison without one."

"But...aren't trials required? And how did they know he was guilty? If my parents trusted him enough to be my guardian, shouldn't there have been a lot of proof before they threw him in prison?"

"One would assume so, Harry. I've been in contact with both Gringotts and a sister law firm over there. They're looking for a will, as well as why you were sent to the Dursleys. If Mr. Black was your godfather, then who was your godmother and why weren't you placed with her? So far, no one knows why your placement wasn't supervised by Children's Services other than a few excuses about the chaos at the time. Harry, I think we need to consider multiple options, even beyond emancipation." Over the next two hours, they developed a working draft of a flexible plan to ensure Harry's safety for the next several years.

OoOoOoOo

Remus Lupin entered his quarters after a long day and ran a hand through his grey-flecked brown hair. The students seemed fine,

although their education had been sorely lacking. He would have to work hard to cover several years of spells in only two terms. He looked down as his foot scuffed a folded piece of paper. Picking it up, he unfolded it and read the few lines.

Mooney

It wasn't me. I wasn't the secret keeper; that was too obvious. It was Peter. He betrayed them. He's still alive. Look at the rat in this clipping. He's at Hogwarts. He has to die. You can find him. You know his scent. It was Peter and he has to die. We have to keep Harry safe. Kill the rat.

Padfoot

Remus Lupin looked up from the scrawled missive he found in his room. The scent on the paper was definitely Padfoot's, that murdering traitor. Padfoot had killed Peter...hadn't he? He looked at the faded newspaper clipping suspiciously. His amber eyes slowly widened and he conjured a magnifying class. Oh sweet Merlin! He dodged students who looked after him in shock as he ran through the hallways with his robes flapping behind him to the Headmaster's office.

OoOoOoOo

Ashwini Ranganathan was a fifteen year old girl with long black hair from Tamil Nadu in South India, although she came to the United States with her parents when she was only six years old. Her family felt strongly about excelling, and she demonstrated that ethic with her studying and grades. A week after the new term started, she met with Harry for the first time.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Harry. I understand Arithmancy wasn't offered at your previous school until you were in the ninth grade, is that correct?"

Harry nodded, "Yes, although we just called it Third Year, and it was an elective."

"OK, let's start with a little background on it then. Arithmancy is a branch of magic concerned with the magical properties of numbers. It's commonly viewed as a precise and measurable way of

predicting the future based on trends. The predictions can be used with other forms of magic to increase the chance of success. It was first used a method of divination by the ancient Greeks to help foretell the outcome of battles. It involves working with large number charts, with the position of each number having a specific purpose." She pulled out her first year text and they started to study in earnest.

Harry was very relieved to learn that not all of his classes had regular homework as he might have had to drop his electives. His Music Appreciation had one quiz of 10 questions every week and one paper due two weeks before the end of the term. Latin had a brief quiz at the start of every class to reinforce what had been used in previous classes and the list of study questions at the end of each chapter that had to be handed in. History required developing a journal by country by date with key events and the impact of the event due at the end of the term, but could be filled out after each class. Fortunately, Physical education had no homework. The other classes had short theory essays usually given on Mondays and due the following Monday.

All in all, Harry was one very busy teenager. He developed and copied a brief form letter with which he declined all invitations, solicitations and endorsement requests and had begun to dread seeing the mail box glowing when he came into the room. He groaned when he saw it and smacked Elias on the shoulder for laughing. After shuffling through the unknown mail, he set it aside when he recognized Hermione's handwriting.

Dear Harry,

So much has happened in the last week! Firstly, on our way back to Hogwarts, the train was stopped and searched for that escaped murderer by horrible things called Dementors. They're really tall, perhaps almost three meters, have grey bodies and are covered in dark hooded cloaks. They have an aura that makes you remember your absolutely worst memories and are just awful! Fortunately the new DADA teacher, Professor Lupin was on the train and could make them go away. He gave everyone chocolate, which helped with the after effects. Even so, I know many people had nightmares that night.

Then yesterday, Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall and Lupin all came to the Gryffindor commons room, talked to Ron Weasley for a

few minutes and then told all the students stay downstairs. The professors then went up to the Third Year boys' dormitory. We heard some shouting, and then they returned, levitating a short shabby man down the stairs. It turns out he was an animagus, someone that can turn into an animal! Remember Professor McGonagall turning from a cat into herself in Transfiguration? Just like that. What's more, he had been posing as Scabbers, Ron's rat (and Percy's before him) for the last twelve years! The Weasleys are in shock; they had no idea!

It turns out that the man's real name is Peter Pettigrew, the man Sirius Black, the escaped prisoner was accused of killing! But more than that...Harry, Sirius Black was the one accused of betraying your parents to Voldemort, but he didn't do it! He never even had a trial; they just snapped his wand and sent him to prison because Pettigrew made it look like he was a mass murderer.

This morning's Daily Prophet said Pettigrew confessed under Veritaserum (a truth serum) that he was a Death Eater, admitted that he betrayed your parent's location to You-Know-Who and that he blew up the street that killed all the Muggles. The article also asked Sirius Black to contact any auror or seek medical attention. Rumor has it that he was a friend of our new professor and that's how it all came to light.

I'll let you know more as I find it out and will send you any articles the Daily Prophet publishes.

Write soon,

Hermione

OoOoOoOo

Author's Note: I had more about Sirius planned for this chapter, but was not satisfied with the writing, so moved it to the next chapter so that I could publish this.

Chapter 7 – Padfoot and Moony

Sirius Black closed his eyes wearily after the visitors left his room at St. Mungo's. Remus had taken him there immediately after Peter was captured and Sirius' own innocence proclaimed. The Healers wanted him to stay in hospital for the next two weeks to receive nutrient potions, as well as additional potions and therapy to restore the degradation to his muscles, bones and nerves from the years of Dementor exposure and meager meals.

Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and Senior Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt had just left. They took his statement using Veritaserum and consented that the interrogation be under his Healer's supervision. As Madame Bones explained, "This is purely for the official record. Pettigrew already confessed to everything, but we want to be sure that nothing falls through the cracks again."

He had to smirk at the tall black auror who accompanied the DMLE Head. He and Shacklebolt had been in Auror training together before he was imprisoned, and he remembered him as tall and skinny. Now the burly man was an imposing Senior Auror. He shook his head at Bones' offer to reinstate him in the Auror program when he recovered if he was still interested. That had been a lifetime ago and he had other priorities these days.

"Thank you Madame Bones, but more than anything I want to find my godson. He's the most important thing in my life now that I know Pettigrew has been caught. I should have been there for him for the last twelve years and we have a lot of catching up to do."

He lay in the bed and pondered the other point she mentioned to him; that someone in the United States had just begun questioning his trial or lack thereof when everything had come out. Why would someone out of the country care about his imprisonment?

The door to his room opened and Sirius looked up expecting to see a Healer, but was surprised to see garishly bright robes and a long silver beard. Even in his Dementor-stressed mind, he could immediately recognize Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts and leader of the Order of the Phoenix.

"Sirius, my dear boy, I am grateful to see you alive and on the road to recovery." His normally cheerful blue eyes appear somber as he continued, "I know you will never be able to forgive me, but please let me offer my deepest and most heart-felt apology for everything you endured. The idea that an innocent man suffered as you did shreds my conscience and keeps me awake at nights. There is no excuse that I can offer, but I hope that at some point you will find it in your heart to permit me to make some sort of restitution."

Sirius snorted and then a half smile tugged at his lips. "Fudge already offered 'restitution'. He promised one hundred thousand galleons for each year I was imprisoned. From what I read in the Daily Prophet, it was through 'dogged determination that he fought through layers of secrecy to find the truth.' Has the man always been that much of an arse?"

Albus gave a small smile and was diplomatic in responding. "He is a confirmed politician, I would say."

Sirius' grey eyes met the elderly wizard's blue ones. "If you really want to help Headmaster, you can bring my godson for a visit. I saw him for a few minutes this summer before he got on the Knight Bus, and waited for him to get home again, but haven't seen him since."

The blue eyes dropped and the Headmaster's shoulders dropped. "The one thing you ask of me, I can't grant."

"Why not? It doesn't even have to be during his classes! Just bring him after class."

"I'm sorry dear boy, there is nothing more that I would like than to bring Harry to see you, but the truth of the matter is that he didn't return to Hogwarts this term. He elected to attend another school."

Sirius blinked in shock. "Harry Potter not at Hogwarts? But...James and Lily would have a fit! Where is he? Why did he leave?"

"Mr. Potter had some difficulties in his first two years and decided it was in his best interest to attend another school. I have to admit that I contributed to his decision." The old man gave a heavy sigh. "After his parents died, I thought the best place for him would be with Lily's sister. I thought she would raise him as her own son, but it wasn't an ideal situation for him. In addition, after he arrived at Hogwarts, I

forgot I had placed mail wards on him to protect him from remaining Death Eaters. When he discovered them, he was not pleased with me."

"Well, what school did he go to? Beauxbatons? Please don't tell me Durmstrang!" He would hate to think of James' son being taught the Dark Arts at Durmstrang.

"The boy chose not to release the name of his school, but based on clues he left, I think I can narrow it down to one of the schools in America. He mentioned both Muggle and Wizarding classes, and was interested in year-round classes."

Sirius sighed heavily and sunk deeper into his pillow. "So I guess I'm going to America to look for him when I get out of here."

Albus laid a reassuring hand on the exhausted man's shoulder. "You can reach him with a letter, dear boy. Considering your relationship, possibly he will give you more information that he gave me. You might be able to convince him to permit a visit; perhaps both you and Remus. I'm sure he would like to hear about his parents from their best friends. If at all possible, I would like to apologize to the child in person and make certain he knows he's always welcome back at Hogwarts."

Albus left soon after the discussion and Sirius fell into a troubled sleep. Later that night, he agonized over a letter. He needed to get in touch with his godson!

OoOoOoOo

Harry groaned as his mail box's flashing woke him up in the morning. Since the beginning of September, Mr. Stillman had intercepted more than a dozen letters with tracking charms, mostly from reporters asking for interviews about why he left Hogwarts. He had forwarded those to Anarosa, who had several plans for "managing the dissemination of information" about him. He thanked Merlin and Morgana regularly that Elias had such a wonderful cousin.

He heard hissing from Xolotl's cage about the muted flashing and stifled a chuckle. The lizard acted like it was royalty and they were all there to cater to him, especially Elias, whom he saw as a favored servant.

He glanced at his roommate's bed, but he appeared asleep with a pillow over his head. With a grin, Harry opened the incoming mail side of his box. He didn't recognize the hand-writing, but then he rarely did these days. He was slightly depressed that it still wasn't Ron's untidy scrawl on the envelope. With a sigh about his former best friend, he opened the latest envelope, wondering what the writer wanted.

Dear Harry,

I know you won't remember me, but your parents named me as your godfather. When you were a baby, you called me "Pa'foo" because my animagus form is a large black dog named Padfoot. You were smart even as a baby! James and Lily were so proud of you!

I know you must be wondering where I've been for the last twelve years. The truth is, another so-called friend of your father's betrayed them to the evil wizard who was responsible for your parents' deaths. When I figured out who betrayed them, I went after him. He cut off his finger and cast a Confringo that hit the street and then escaped in his rat animagus form. Remus thinks the Confringo must have hit a Muggle gas line, because half the street blew up and a dozen Muggles were killed. Since only his finger was found, they thought I had killed him as well as all of the Muggles. I was thrown in Azkaban for what the rat did. The truth finally came out and I am now a free man.

I'm in hospital at the moment recovering from Azkaban, but very much want to see you again. I saw Dumbledore and asked him to let you visit, but he said you left Hogwarts. Your parents designated me as your guardian, so I want to make sure you're all right and have everything you need. I also want to offer you a home for the summers and holidays.

Please let me know when I can come visit and to where. I would love to tell you all about your parents and learn all about you. Do you like to prank? Do you like to fly? Do you prefer to read? Your Mum loved Charms and Potions while your Dad loved Transfiguration and flying (when he wasn't pranking others).

Your Godfather,

Sirius Black (Padfoot)

P.S. Another friend of your father's would also like to see you. He used to call you "his cub" and you called him "Moo-ey" although his nickname was really Moony.

Harry sat back as thoughts danced across his mind at a furious pace. He knew about Sirius Black from Hermione and knew it wasn't the man's fault that he hadn't been part of Harry's life growing up. And yet here he was offering Harry a home when not at school when he was barely out of prison. All the youth had ever wanted was to be loved and to be part of a family!

He put the pillows behind his back and pulled out his notebook to write a response.

Dear Mr. Black,

Thank you for your letter. One of my friends told me about the traitor Peter Pettigrew being found at Hogwarts and I'm happy to know that you've been freed. I hope you are well on the road to recovery from that horrible experience.

At Hogwarts, I liked flying best. I was a Seeker on the Gryffindor Quidditch team in my first year; the youngest Seeker in a century from what I was told. I liked Charms and Transfiguration OK, but hated Potions. That was mostly because of the professor though, because now I'm learning to like it. I have a very full schedule this year, including Battle Magics, Botany (Herbology), Charms, History, Latin, Mathematics, Music Appreciation, Physical Education, and Transfiguration. My classes can run sixty minutes, ninety minutes or two hours, depending on the class. They also start Arithmancy in First Year here, so I'm being tutored once a week to help me catch up in time for next year.

I haven't been much of a prankster, and certainly nothing like the Weasley twins at Hogwarts. They're wickedly brilliant that way. But my new Transfiguration teacher says every time you learn a new spell, you should try to think of half a dozen ways you could use it. Maybe I'll try to find a prank for one of my six ways. I would love to hear about some of the pranks you and my father played while at school, as well as what you did after completing your NEWTs.

Let me get back to you on when we could meet. I'll have to set something up. In the meantime, I hope you write again and look forward to meeting you.

Your godson,

Harry

Harry copied Black's original letter and his response for Anarosa, and asked for her recommendations on how to proceed. He heard Elias starting to move around in his bed, so quickly grabbed his clothes to get the shower before his roommate.

Meals were much noisier now that all of the seventh through ninth graders were back at Blair House. He selected waffles, sausages and orange juice from the menu and received it quickly along with the morning nutrient potion. He had one more week on two potions a day, then one month on the single potion and he would finally be done.

As he was eating, he heard a pop and then a high-pitched voice by his elbow ask "Mr. Harry Potter?" A small green house elf stood near him. He quickly swallowed and said, "Yes, I'm Harry Potter. Who are you?"

A broad smile lit the small face. "I am Trixie, sir. Master Healer Masuto asked me to give you this." She handed him a folded paper, bowed and popped out.

Harry opened the note curiously, aware that his table mates were watching him inquisitively. "Harry, please stop by the clinic after classes to discuss the blood work we started in July." He blinked in surprise. He had totally forgotten that the Healer had been interested in the mix of basilisk venom and phoenix tears.

"Healer Masuto is reminding me of a quick check-up after classes" he said to his curious table mates. He folded the note and returned to his breakfast as the others lost interest. They all knew that the Healer was relentless in following up on his charges.

At the end of the day, he walked into the Clinic and waited for the receptionist. "Hi, I'm Harry Potter and Healer Masuto asked to see

me this afternoon." In just a few minutes, he was seated in the Healer's book-filled office.

The Healer's gentle smile was reassuring. "Good afternoon, Harry. How are you this fine day?"

"I'm good, sir," answered the young teen politely. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes and thank you for coming so promptly. When we first met, I was curious about the basilisk bite you suffered. You told me you survived because a phoenix cried on the wound, is that correct?"

"Yes sir, Fawkes saved me."

"I ran some tests myself and then had the results confirmed with blood specialists. Firstly, let me assure you that you are in no danger from the combination. In fact, from what we can tell, you may actually have benefitted from it."

Harry frowned in confusion. "Benefited, sir?"

"My original concern was that the basilisk venom might have damaged your veins or organs, but my exam indicated that all damage had been repaired by the phoenix tears. However, you are the only living person to survive a basilisk bite. It is one of the deadliest venoms in existence."

Harry nodded, he already knew that.

"What we believe though, is that the venom acted like an inoculation. Usually, an inoculation introduces a weakened form of a pathogen to help the body develop immunity. In your case, you received an influx of the most deadly venom. While our blood sample was too small for a comprehensive test, it does appear that you've developed an immunity to many venoms and poisons."

He leaned forward and said seriously, "Now I don't want you testing that Harry. We only assessed some of the most toxic strains, and it doesn't mean that you won't have other side effects. But you will likely survive something that would outright kill another person. If you would like, we can do more comprehensive testing. I know several of my colleagues were quite interested in following up."

Harry bit back a groan and shook his head rapidly. "Um, no thank you sir." At the man's surprised look, he added "I'm already known as the only person to survive the killing curse. I got mobbed for it the first time I entered the wizarding world. I really don't want to be known for even more freaky stuff. They would probably start calling me the Boy-Who-Refuses-To-Die or some other stupid name."

The Healer looked disappointed but nodded his understanding. "That's fine, Harry. It's totally up to you."

The young teen relented enough to say, "I'm hoping to take some Healing classes in the next year or two. Perhaps the research could be an independent study assignment then." Masuto chuckled and sent Harry off to dinner.

OoOoOoOo

Dear Harry,

I loved your letter, but please call me Sirius. Mr. Black is much too stuffy for me. Or call me Padfoot if you prefer.

Youngest Seeker in a century! Congratulations! Your father loved to fly as well. When we were in school, the four of us were great friends (before Pettigrew became a traitor). We were known as the Marauders and loved to play pranks. We were all Gryffindors, and although we pranked everyone, we particularly liked to prank Slytherins.

One April Fool's Day, the four of us held a 12-hour pranking contest. James spelled the door to the Great Hall so that everyone who passed through it skipped to their seats and then began speaking in a random teacher's voice. It was hilarious to hear delicate little girls speak like Slughorn or a big husky boy speaking like Flitwick! Peter spelled the suits of armor so that they each declared their undying love for a random student who passed by and followed them around all day, spouting love sonnets. Moony did something to the water in the rest rooms, so that when anyone washed their hands, an invisible dye was applied. The dye was multi-colored and only became visible after a few hours. It covered everything - hand, face, books, walls, homework - totally psychedelic. My prank didn't hit until lunch time. It wasn't anything big or flashy –everyone just turned into

dancing kangaroos. Why kangaroos you ask? Well, it was either that or ant eaters, and I thought the kangaroos would be able to disco better. And it wasn't from the food which is what James thought; I had a timed-released spell on each chair, including all of the teachers. I had to swipe James invisibility cloak to do that in the middle of the night a few days before April 1st.

Your father and I both joined the Auror program when we graduated from Hogwarts. We also joined Dumbledore and his group in fighting Voldemort. Your mother was thinking of pursuing her Charms Mastery, but you came along before that could proceed. She was thrilled to have you though and never regretted postponing her Mastery.

I'm doing better, thank you. I still have to gain about four stone, but that will take a while. I hope I'll be able to see you soon.

Your Godfather,

Sirius

Anarosa Diaz placed a brief call to Principal Graham when she received the request Harry forwarded regarding a meeting with his godfather. "Mr. Potter's godfather would like to meet his godson and Mr. Potter is agreeable. However, as you are aware, Mr. Potter is a celebrity in Britain and there have been appeals for him to return to Britain and his former school. We would prefer to use one of the standard family meeting rooms on the Academy campus under the school's formidable wards to ensure that Mr. Potter will not be removed without his consent."

Principal Graham's voice was mildly surprised. "Are you concerned that an attempt will be made, Ms. Diaz?"

"No, but I am following the path of better safe than sorry. The school provides meeting rooms for multiple occasions, and port keys out of the campus are not permitted unless made by an approved staff member. While Harry wants to trust his godfather, I would also prefer to confirm that no compulsions are placed on him, and a supervised and secured setting will help ensure that."

"Very well, as you say we already permit our students to entertain family and friends in secure on-campus rooms. However, we will

want a list of who will be attending, as well as confirmation that any visitors are harmless to our students and staff. While we permit the so-called dark creatures on campus, we still confirm that they are safe for the duration of their visit."

Once the meeting was approved, Ms. Diaz and Harry spent time going over questions regarding his parents, Black, and Black's role in the war against Voldemort and his subsequent incarceration before Harry wrote back to his godfather.

Dear Sirius,

Your April Fool's Day prank war with my Dad sounded like a lot of fun. I would have enjoyed seeing it. You blokes had great ideas. I'm sure the Weasley twins would love to meet you, especially as you could be a source of inspiration!

Now to the good news - you've been approved for a Saturday visit from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM. Please let me know what date works for you. Also, please let me know if you are coming alone or with additional visitors. If with visitors, we need confirmation that they aren't harmful to anyone on campus. For example, a vampire must come with his own blood supply, a werewolf should not visit during the full moon without Wolfsbane, and a Veela must be able to control their allure.

My Principal is going to provide you with an international port key to the school's receiving area as soon as you let me know the date.

I do have some pictures of my folks that Hagrid (Hogwarts Groundskeeper) assembled for me, but if you have others, I would really love to see them.

Sincerely,

Harry

A letter from an enthusiastic Sirius arrived the next morning.

Dear Harry,

I'm very excited about visiting! I will be out of the hospital in another week, so two Saturdays from now will work for me. I can't wait to see

you; it's been so long! Well, actually I had a little peek after I escaped from Azkaban. I was in my animagus form and saw you get on the Knight Bus. I waited around until you returned later that day, but didn't see you again after that. But that wasn't a good look, just enough to see that you definitely still had James hair!

If you don't object, I will bring at least one other person. I mentioned Remus Lupin, or Moony, right? You seem to be a bit blasé about werewolves. Is that true? Because Remus was bitten as a child, but two Saturdays will be a week after the full moon, so he would be perfectly safe and you loved him as a baby.

I'll find and bring all of the pictures that I can.

Your excited Godfather,

Sirius

OoOoOoOo

Sirius did not want to enter the old Black family home in London when he left the hospital. He was sure it was not only a filthy mess, but filled with dark artifacts. He took a room at the Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade to be closer to Remus. It wasn't as busy as Diagon Alley and would let him get used to more people in a gradual manner. He was still struggling with finding the world too big and noisy after his years in Azkaban.

The Saturday they were to visit Harry found Sirius fidgeting all day. They wouldn't leave until early afternoon due to the time difference, but he found it difficult to be calm when he was finally going to see his godson after all these years. He kept checking his pocket to make sure the port key was there that Harry forwarded from his school Headmistress.

He was in the restaurant area of the Inn nursing a butterbeer when Remus finally entered. Sirius was on his feet in an instant and halfway across the room when another figure followed his friend in to the building.

"Albus, what are you doing here," he asked in confusion as he joined the two men. He glanced quickly at Remus, who gave him an apologetic shrug.

"Good afternoon, dear boy. You are looking much better than you were the last time I saw you," the older man said jovially.

"Yes, I have a long way to go, but it's getting better every day. It was good to see you again. I don't mean to be rude, but Remus and I need to be going."

"I understand dear boy, and that's why I asked to accompany Remus here. I would like to apologize to Harry in person for any wrongs I may have inadvertently caused him and make certain he knows he's always welcome back at Hogwarts. I certainly don't want to intrude upon your entire day, but wanted to ask to take just a few moments to make that apology."

Sirius frowned at the elderly wizard. "I'm don't know, Albus. I didn't talk to Harry about you; only about Moony coming."

"It would only be for a few moments and then I'll port key right back here. I owe it to the boy, Sirius. I made mistakes and owe him a personal apology." Sirius still hesitated and he added, "Please, Sirius. Let me do this."

With a sigh and a desire to get moving, Sirius reluctantly agreed. He brought out the parchment that Harry had sent him, and once they were all touching it, he said "St. Croix Academy". After the familiar jerk and a brief disorientation, the three men found themselves in a small windowless, but brightly lit room. A single wooden door was on one wall, but a sign flashed briefly getting his attention. "St. Croix Apparation Point". Below that another sign read "Students / Guests please wait for a guide before exiting." A faint hum sounded in the background as the international visitors were recorded.

A tall slender woman with copper colored skin and brown hair opened the door. She raised an eyebrow at seeing three figures. "Good morning gentlemen, I'm Christina Sadler, Mr. Potter's Residence Supervisor. I'm here to guide you to the meeting room as this apparation point is off the campus." She paused and then added, "I believe Mr. Potter is only expecting two men today. May I have your names?"

Sirius stepped forward and bowed, giving a rakish smile, "Sirius Black, I'm Harry's godfather. This is my friend, Remus Lupin, whom

Harry is expecting. The other gentleman is Albus Dumbledore, the Headmaster of Harry's former school. This morning he asked for just a couple minutes of Harry's time."

The woman nodded and then cast a Patronus. A silvery loon appeared and flew briefly around the room before returning to Ms. Sadler. "Go tell Ms. Diaz that Sirius Black, Remus Lupin and Albus Dumbledore are here to see Harry Potter." The bird flew off through the wall.

She smiled and then said "Gentlemen, we prefer not to have to confiscate wands from our visitors, so please do not cast any spells without permission of your host, who is Mr. Potter. Now, if you'll follow me, I will lead you to your meeting room."

The silvery loon sped through the family meeting room of Blair House to Anarosa. Christina Sadler's clear voice announced not only Sirius Black and Remus Lupin, but Albus Dumbledore.

"Bloody hell," Harry exclaimed, "what is he doing here? Sirius never mentioned bringing him, only Remus Lupin."

"It would appear that your concern about his unusual interest in you was accurate," Anarosa said shaking her head. "However, this gives us the perfect opportunity to ask the questions about Sirius and Dumbledore's actions and inactions. It's just sooner than we anticipated." She tilted her head as she considered the situation. "Perhaps it will even be more beneficial to have him here to answer them in front of your godfather. The timing may actually be advantageous to us."

"I still don't like it," the young teen complained. "I didn't invite him and he's definitely not welcome. And it's just rude to intrude on my first meeting with Sirius." Even so, he reviewed the questions with Anarosa until a chime announced their visitors.

Harry stood and faced the door, his heart pounding slightly in anticipation. A tall thin man with black hair entered the room and immediately spotted Harry. He stepped forward and started to reach out and then dropped his arms. "Harry," his voice cracked and he had to swallow before continuing. "I'm so glad to see you. You look so much like your father." He hung his head slightly. "I'm so sorry I wasn't there for you pup."

"Sirius," Harry began and then stopped and smiled. "Padfoot." Sirius' head snapped up and a grin started to form. "It's good to see you again." Harry held out his hand, which the older man grasped, only to pull the youth into a brief hug. He released the teen and wiped his eyes quickly.

"This," he said as he pointed to the second man with light brown hair flecked with grey, "is Remus Lupin, also known as Moony". The man's smile reached his amber eyes and he hesitantly held out a hand to shake. He was pleased when the young teen stepped up and shook it readily. "I'm very pleased to see you again, Harry."

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Moony", Harry said with an easy smile. "I've learned to say my N's since we last met."

A soft chuckle came from both men and Remus said, "that's right, you called me 'Moo-ey'".

Harry's smile dropped and his face became neutral as he turned to the third man. "Good morning, Headmaster. I wasn't expecting you here today."

Albus had his most benevolent grandfatherly face on as he said, "I do apologize for encroaching on your reunion, my boy, but I asked Sirius to let me take just a couple of minutes to offer you a personal apology for any actions of mine that caused you pain. That was never my intention. I merely wanted to keep you safe in a dangerous time."

"Of course, Headmaster." He waved to the chairs in front of the room's fireplace where a small table held a tea service. "You've met my Residence Supervisor, Ms. Sadler, but please allow me to introduce Anarosa Diaz." He waved his hand vaguely in her direction. "Shall we be seated? May I offer you something to drink?" Albus seemed pleased to be included and quickly accepted a seat. Harry poured a cup for everyone, taking his time to force his nerves to settle.

Once everyone was sipping their tea, Harry took a deep breath and started the plan he had just reviewed with Anarosa. "Sirius, may I ask a couple of questions while Professor Dumbledore is still here? I would be interested in his comments."

"Sure, Pup." The former convict deliberately lounged in his chair, trying not to show the nervousness that he felt in front of his godson and the two strangers.

"I'm struggling to understand why you were imprisoned at all, much less for nearly a third of your life." Anarosa noticed that Albus flinched at the comment. "If I understood the history books correctly, the Headmaster was also the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, so I don't understand how the captured Death Eaters had trials, but you didn't."

Albus sighed heavily and Sirius turned in his direction, letting him answer. "I am afraid that I bear the burden of blame in that tragic event, my boy. I allowed the confusion and turmoil after the defeat of Voldemort to supersede ensuring justice was done. There is no excuse for it and I know I will never be able to repay Sirius for that injustice."

Harry glanced at his godfather and frowned as the gaunt man's eyes became haunted and pained. "Sirius, you mentioned in your letter that besides being an Auror, you were part of an organization actively working to defeat Voldemort, which Albus Dumbledore led. Is that right?"

Sirius nodded, confused about the direction of the questions. He wanted to know about Harry, how he grew up, and whether he would like to spend holidays with him, not regurgitate the past or talk about Dumbledore.

"Well, this is where I'm struggling, Sirius. I find it odd that a member of Professor Dumbledore's own organization didn't get a trial. If everyone in that group believed you guilty, wouldn't it make sense to question you under Veritaserum to see just how far your betrayal went? I mean, how did they know what secrets you shared, what plots and schemes you knew of?"

Remus' face showed dawning understanding of the questions and he turned to look at the elderly wizard with quizzical eyes.

Harry turned to the Headmaster. "Tell me Professor Dumbledore, did you ask the members of your vigilante group to take any loyalty

oaths?" Anarosa pointed out those would have helped support Sirius' innocence.

"No Harry, we trusted one another. I understand that you're confused about what happened to your godfather, but there were no nefarious intentions behind it. It was a tragic and horrible mistake."

Harry nodded, but continued asking his questions. "When you suspected a leak, did you at least ask the members of your group to sign a magical contract not to betray the Order or one another?"

"Of course not Harry. If there had been a spy, that would have alerted them and it would have been disrespectful to the loyal members."

The teen finally rolled his eyes and asked, "I supposed asking them to roll up their sleeves was too much for you as well?" Both Sirius and Remus hung their heads at not having considered that with Wormtail.

Harry moved to the next topic. "Headmaster, back to your interest in me and your desire for me to return to Hogwarts, I have a question. Would you tell me whether there was a reason I was never treated for malnutrition while at Hogwarts?"

"Malnutrition!" Sirius was on his knees before Harry's chair in an instant, grasped his godson's arms and searched his face and looked over his slight frame. "Why were you malnourished?"

"Because I wasn't fed much in the ten years before I went to Hogwarts. Why wasn't I treated once I arrived there, Headmaster?"

The blue eyes were no longer cheery, but had darkened somewhat. "Obviously no one realized that you were malnourished, Harry. If we had, we would certainly have treated it."

"No one realized it? After all my trips to the Infirmary? Hmm. Interestingly, St. Croix Academy had me on nutrient potions my second day here."

Sirius' voice got louder, "Harry, why weren't you fed properly? Albus, what does he mean?" Remus' eyes turned more yellow as they stared at the Headmaster.

"Didn't you tell them the story Headmaster? How you left me on my relative's doorstep; relatives who hated magic only more than they hated me? That I lived in a cupboard – which incidentally is where my Hogwarts letter was addressed – and was kept ignorant of the wizarding world by your instructions? Or that I begged after First Year not to return home, but you not only sent me there, it was without any counseling after being involved in a professor's death? Or that I begged again following Second Year after being injured by and killing a basilisk and saving Ginny Weasley from Voldemort's ghost, but was again shuttled home without medical treatment or counseling? And you wonder why I sought another school?"

Remus' eyes turned an eerie yellow and his lips curled back in a snarl as Sirius stood to tower over Dumbledore in fury. "What did you do to my godson! Why was he involved in a professor's death? Why the bloody hell was a basilisk anywhere around him? And why didn't he have treatment!"

Dumbledore unfurled his aura and pushed Sirius out of his personal space. "Harry, I can honestly say that I never intended you harm with my actions. I sincerely believed that while Petunia wasn't appreciative of magic, her bond to family would ensure that she took care of you. I thought if you were brought into the wizarding world before Hogwarts that former followers of Voldemort would attempt to harm you. The mail ward was for the same reason, and after ten years I simply forgot about it." He sighed heavily and stood up, forcing Sirius to take a step back.

"Obviously my coming here today was a mistake. I only wanted to offer my apologies for whatever my part was in your decision to leave Hogwarts and assure you that you are always welcome back. However, my presence is taking away from meeting your father's good friends, so I will return to Hogwarts." He nodded once, "Ladies, gentlemen" and exited the room, quickly followed by Christina Sadler to show him the most direct route off campus.

Sirius looked at the young teen with desperate eyes. "I didn't know, Harry. I swear to Merlin I didn't know. I'm so sorry I wasn't there for you. My fault, it's all my fault." Emotion wracked the older man and both Harry and Remus helped him sit down.

Harry sent a panicked look at Anarosa who coolly produced a calming draught from her briefcase. She handed it to Remus who held it to Sirius' lips until he drank it. When Sirius was calmer, Harry said quietly, "The past is the past, Sirius. I don't blame you for it. I blame Dumbledore for quite a bit, but I don't blame you. And I would like to get to know you again."

The haunted eyes looked up quickly. "Really? I...I would like that Harry. I know I'm not well yet. I still have pretty dark days, but I'm getting better."

Remus interrupted gently, "You've only been out a few months Padfoot, and most of that was on the run. You were just released from the hospital two days ago. Don't push yourself so hard."

Harry smiled gratefully at the gentle man. At the smile, Remus looked thoughtful and then raised almost fearful eyes to the likeness of one of his former best friends. "Will you also allow me to get to know you, Harry?"

"As long as you don't try to force me back to Hogwarts, I would be happy to know one of my father's friends, Moony. I am curious though, I know why I didn't see Sirius while I was at the Dursleys, but why did you never visit or check up on me?"

"I wasn't permitted." He looked embarrassed as he continued, "Sirius mentioned that he wrote how I was bitten by a werewolf as a child. The wards around your house kept out 'dark creatures' as well as Death Eaters. My condition also prevented me from adopting or having guardianship of children."

Anarosa interjected, "You will find the laws and public opinion more lenient in the States, Mr. Lupin. As long as Harry doesn't mind, the government here certainly won't as long as you either take your Wolfsbane or are in a safe room during the full moon."

The weary man raised his eyes to Harry, awaiting his decision. To his surprise, the boy only said, "That's why you're called Moony? Good nickname. What was my Dad's nickname?"

Remus' mouth dropped open in shock. Just like that? His condition was being accepted? The cub wasn't turning him away? He was willing to treat him normally?

Sirius chuckled weakly and used a finger to close his mouth. "Prongs, we called him Prongs because his animagus was a stag. I have pictures here somewhere." Sirius started looking through his pockets and then drew out a small book, which he promptly enlarged. Anarosa transfigured some of the chairs into a single couch, where Harry sat in the middle with a photo album on his knees while Sirius and Remus sat on either side, telling him about each picture.

It was a very good morning after all as three shattered hearts began to heal.

OoOoOoOo

Dear Hermione,

I hope you're doing well. How are your classes going? I'm enclosing a copy of my notes from Arithmancy tutoring sessions. Let me know whether it's similar to what you're learning.

Have I mentioned how much I'm enjoying my classes now? I get along with most of the kids in my class. There are two that I stay away from (Tony and Larry) because I think they're smoking something outside of class; they always smell a bit like oily herbs and are a bit odd. Other than that, Rich can be a bit pompous, but at least he's nothing like Malfoy. His father is in the diplomatic corps and he's had to attend a lot of big dinners, so learned how to talk with adults and it doesn't always come across well with kids our age.

I had the opportunity to meet Sirius Black and Remus Lupin this weekend. Believe it or not, Professor Dumbledore had the nerve to come with them uninvited! He said it was to apologize, but when confronted with everything he's done, he just said he never intended to cause me harm and then left.

Sirius and Remus, or Padfoot and Moony as they're also known, brought pictures of their time at Hogwarts and of my folks after they moved into Godric's Hollow. We spent hours talking about what my parents were like.

I feel terrible for Sirius, Azkaban damaged him badly. His emotions are all over the place, but I can see the man he used to be under the

pain and anguish. I look forward to seeing him more as he heals. He's thinking of renting a house near my school once he's feeling better, to spend more time with me and also give me another place to go during the holidays. He likes to call me Pup (I think because he's a dog animagus) or Prongslet, because my Dad's animagus was a stag named Prongs. I like him a lot.

Remus Lupin seems nice. He was always soft-spoken and gentle until he got angry with Dumbledore for everything that happened to me. Then I wouldn't have wanted to face him in a dark alley! He could be right scary. What's he like as a teacher?

Oops, Elias is yelling that it's time for breakfast, so I better go.

Talk to you soon,

Harry

Chapter 8 – The Ministry and Mayhem

Remus Lupin sat in the staff lounge after finishing the grading of the second year essays. He gazed into the flames in the fireplace as he thought about Harry Potter, son and godson of his best friends, a boy Moony recognized as pack. After hearing about Harry's upbringing at Lily's sister's house, he had to fight to keep the wolf under control, even though it was past the full moon. He wanted to rip out the throats of the Dursleys and wouldn't mind punishing Albus Dumbledore as well.

The normally gentle man sighed heavily. Had he been so indoctrinated into believing the propaganda about everyone's favorite Leader of the Light that he failed to think for himself? He could have tracked Harry down and checked on him outside of the house or at school if the wards wouldn't let him close to the house.

He failed Harry just as much as he failed Sirius. Even now, his guilt over Sirius was just starting to abate, and that was only because his friend had forgiven him repeatedly for not fighting for him to have a fair trial; something even the real Death Eaters had.

A cup of steaming tea entered his line of vision and he looked up to see Minerva offering him the cup. He accepted the cup and said gently "Thank you, Minerva." He sipped it and let the warmth filter down and slowly unclench pain in his chest.

The Transfiguration teacher sat down in the overstuffed chair next to him and sipped her own tea. Without looking at him, she asked gently, "Do you want to talk about it?"

Remus considered the offer. He wasn't one to gossip about the Headmaster and his decisions, but Minerva was his former Head of House and the Deputy Headmistress. Surely she could help him decipher what had happened to his cub?

He turned slightly towards the older woman. "Sirius and I visited Harry this weekend. He's looking very good and enjoying his new school. But there were things I learned during that visit that...unsettled me."

Thirty minutes later, Albus strolled into the staff lounge. He had made it through much of the paper work on his desk and wanted to

reward himself with tea and biscuits and some friendly faces. He smiled cheerfully at Minerva and Remus, who were sitting in front of the fire. It was good to see the DADA teacher accepted by the other staff members.

He was only a few feet into the room when an angry Scottish brogue disturbed the serene setting. "Albus Dumbledore, didn't I tell you the Dursleys were the worst sort of Muggles! That puir bairn had to be put on nutrient potions for malnutrition and he needed them for the two years he was here!" The elderly wizard paled as his eyes shifted looking for an escape. "I wonder if it's too late to find another career," he reflected in the moments before Minerva reached him.

Harry couldn't hold back the smile as he recognized the handwriting on the letters in his incoming mail box. He had one from Sirius, Hermione and Neville.

Dear Harry,

I know I said something after Dumbledore left, but I just wanted to say again how proud I was of you and your handling of the Headmaster. Most people don't think about questioning his decisions and judgments, but you and I are visible proof that his decisions aren't always correct.

I probably shouldn't tell you this, but Remus and I had some conversations reminiscent to our old Marauder days, and he's been pranking the Headmaster for you. While the Headmaster was out of his office, Remus spelled his box of lemon sherbets to randomly taste like brussel sprouts or wilted spinach. He convinced a house elf that seems to be devoted to you to assist in pranking the Headmaster's meals. The house elf, Dobby, secured all of the Headmaster's socks, and Remus spelled a third of them to either make his drinks taste like spoiled yak milk (is there good yak milk?) or his meals to taste like raw liver and sauerkraut. He also spelled single threads that he sewed into the hems of the Headmaster's robes to cause it to sound like he suffers from extreme flatulence.

I'm still on nutrient potions and am seeing a mind healer. She's actually amazed that I'm as coherent as I am after so many years, and is now interested in a study on the abilities of animagi to help patients control stress and maintain mental health. Go figure.

If you're interested, I would like to rent a house near the Academy for the winter holidays and have you stay with me. We could try all of the winter sports they have in the area and do some shopping. I have twelve years of gifts and fun to make up for!

Your Dogfather,

Sirius

Harry grinned at the signature as well as at the renewal of the offer to rent a house near the Academy so that Sirius was near Harry and could offer him a home for the holidays. He was still a bit hesitant with both Sirius and Remus; the adults in his life prior to St. Croix hadn't done much to earn the trust he had once freely given them. The teachers in his primary school had ignored obvious signs of abuse. The Headmaster had dropped him at the Dursleys and disregarded him for ten years. Professor McGonagall hadn't done much to help ensure a Muggle-raised child succeeded at Hogwarts, plus she ignored his concerns when he came to her about the Philosopher's Stone. Snape was continually abusive and the DADA teachers had been either possessed or incompetent. He needed Sirius and Remus to prove themselves to him, and they were obviously seemed to be trying. He felt cautiously optimistic that he might be able to form a family with Sirius.

He turned to Hermione's letter and had to chuckle at the precise and familiar writing that seemed to flow across the page.

Dear Harry,

Sirius and Professor Lupin sound like very good friends of your father. I'm glad that you had a chance to meet them personally. I hope your godfather continues to recover steadily from his imprisonment.

So your Healer gave you the growth potion after all and you gained two inches? Congratulations! I know you hated being one of the shorter boys in the class and am happy for you!

As you can imagine, I've been researching other schools since you chose not to return to Hogwarts. Terry Boot, a Third Year in Ravenclaw, shared a table with me in the library the other day and asked me about it. The next day, half a dozen Ravenclaw students

came to see me to review my research results and began their own confirmation into the international standing of Hogwarts. They were not pleased that they may not be receiving a premier education, and my results show that Hogwarts is falling behind other schools especially in History and Potions. One of the Ravenclaws, Penny Clearwater, wants to correlate our Potions results with the impact to related careers, such as Potions Masters, Healers, and Aurors. I shared a little bit with my parents and we're going to discuss my future more during the Christmas holidays.

Ron and I don't do much together these days; he's been spending more time with Dean and Seamus. He's more interested in chess and Quidditch than in school, so we don't have that much in common. I've been working with Neville as well as more of the Ravenclaws. Neville's been doing much better in Potions lately and says it's all due to the book you sent him. Professor Snape has even transferred more of his attention from Neville to Ron.

Missing you,

Hermione

Thank goodness Hermione was finding friends or at least study companions with other students. He had been afraid that a break with Ron would end with her being isolated again, but was pleased to see she still had friendly acquaintances. He turned to the next letter, pleased to see Neville's seal on it.

Dear Harry,

Thank you for your letter and offering to be a "pen pal". I like that term and concept and would be delighted to be yours as well.

I have to thank you again for the book you sent. I have a much better understanding of the basics of potions brewing now, and believe it or not, have actually been getting Acceptable on my potions, which is probably the best I can hope for. Snape has even cut back on his comments to me during class!

Even though I'm doing better on Potions, I'm still best at Herbology. I think I may lead House Longbottom into growing rare potion ingredients in the future. It would be both interesting and lucrative if I can set up the greenhouses properly.

I passed along Hermione's initial research into how Hogwarts test results compare to other schools to my grandmother. Did I ever mention that she sits on the Board of Governors? She's going to ask for an investigation into the school's standing and the qualifications of the staff.

Are you still enjoying Charms, Transfiguration and Battle Magics best? How about your teachers?

Dutifully yours,

Neville F. Longbottom

Harry tucked the letters away and made a note to respond to everyone as soon as his homework was done. Perhaps he would also write a note to Remus Lupin thanking him for visiting and offering to write to him more often as well. If the man was willing to prank the Headmaster on his behalf, it was the least he could do.

As the weather turned colder and the trees outfitted themselves in their brilliant fall colours, Sirius Black slowly recovered his health. He gained two stone and while he still needed to gain more, he was no longer emaciated. His eyes still bore a haunted look at times, but his sessions with the Mind Healer had helped him control his emotions better. At her suggestion, he began training in Occlumency to help that aspect of his recovery. He met with his cousin Andromeda Tonks who had been cast out from the Family when she married a Muggle named Ted Tonks. He found the man quite likable and re-invited Andromeda into the House of Black along with her daughter Nymphadora. Slowly he began to take on his duties as the Head of the Ancient and Noble House of Black, although managing the estates, businesses, vaults and Wizengamot seat was a bit overwhelming.

As the Winter Holidays approached, Sirius contacted a local realtor in Stillwater and found a three bedroom cottage to rent on one of the many nearby lakes. He was ecstatic when Harry agreed to spend the holidays with him and Remus.

The Blair House Residence quarters were connected to the Floo network for the break to make it easier for the students to return

home for the holidays. Harry and Sirius scheduled time for him to come through on the first day of the holiday for a quick campus tour.

The fireplace gave a whoosh and Sirius stepped out with an eager look on his face. He spotted Harry and went to him eagerly. Harry held out a hand, which the older man gripped and was then pulled into a warm hug and an emotional "Harry, I've missed you Pup. I'm so glad you wanted to join me for Christmas!"

Harry forced himself to relax into the hug. "Thank you for inviting me, Padfoot. I'm looking forward to getting away from my homework and exploring all those winter sports. I brushed up on my cushioning charms for ice skating. I think I'll need it!"

He withdrew from the hug slowly, surprised at his own reluctance. "I thought you might want to see the House before we explore the campus."

After an hour touring Blair House and the main highlights of the campus, they returned to the Residence and Floo'd to the cottage.

"Remus, it's good to see you again," he said to the werewolf who was waiting for them. The man looked tired after the recent full moon, but his amber eyes were warm and kind.

"Thank you for permitting me to join you and Sirius for the Holidays, Harry" the man responded with a gentle smile.

"Well of course you would join us!" exclaimed Sirius. "I wouldn't leave anyone alone at Hogwarts for the holidays."

"Absolutely not," Harry agreed, remembering his two years at his former school.

They took turns making meals, although Sirius usually cheated and apparated to a nearby restaurant for take-out when it was his turn. Harry graciously ignored the boxes he found in the trash, but Remus teased his friend about his lack of cooking skills, suggesting he needed a wife to look out for him.

"Bite your tongue!" the man gasped in mock horror. "I'll hire a house elf if I need to!"

The trio spent one afternoon ice skating and all agreed that the cushioning charms were important. Downhill skiing another day was quickly abandoned after collisions with rocks, ravines and each other, but they all found cross-country skiing fun, especially when they ended with hot chocolate accompanied by tiny white marshmallows.

They spent time shopping in both the magical and non-magical shops shopping for Christmas and to Harry's delight, they bought a tree and decorated it. One evening was spent wrapping the gifts that would go back to Hogwarts and both older men were impressed with Harry's two-way mail box as he sent off presents to his Hogwarts friends.

He sent Hermione an Ever Sharp Never Ending Ink dictating quill for her research, as well as a long-sleeved t-shirt he customized. On the front of the shirt was a picture of a long-haired girl surrounded by dozens of books of every type with the words "There's no such thing as too many books" below. The shirt was charmed to have more books added over time until they appeared to be spilling off both the front and back of the shirt.

He sent Neville the additional botany books from the St. Croix classes as well as his own customized long-sleeved shirt. This showed an animated young man with a whip and a chair taming a lion-headed plant that grew from a seedling to ten feet tall over time. The slogan read "Who ever said working with plants was easy?"

A wizarding camera made its way to Arthur and Molly Weasley to record their family moments, as well as a basket of American gourmet foods that they wouldn't likely get to experience in Britain. He also sent Mr. Weasley the book "How Things Work" from a non-magical bookstore. He added a mixed box of candy and healthy snacks for Ron, even though the boy hadn't written to him in four months. If the friendship was ending, he wanted it to end on a cordial note.

Sirius and Harry joined together and bought a new wardrobe for Remus as his Christmas gift. They included attire that could pass in both the magical and non-magical worlds, but especially gave him new acromantula silk teaching robes with personal comfort heating and cooling charms and spelled to rebound most jinxes and hexes.

Prior to the holiday, Harry received permission to work on a special Transfiguration project as a present for his godfather. With the assistance of Mr. Latham, he transfigured wooden blocks into carvings of a stag, a grim and a wolf playing with one another. Even while playing, the wolf seemed to be more dignified than the other two; while the stag pranced tossing its antlers and the grinning grim looked ready to pounce on the other two. He received extra credit for the detail involved in the transfiguration and hoped Sirius would enjoy the carvings.

Harry woke up early on Christmas morning to a large furry dog bounding on his bed and slobbering on his face. "Eww! Gerrof!" the boy cried as he pushed at the heavy dog. Sirius transformed back, laughing at his godson's disgusted face as he wiped it dry.

He tickled the boy's sides and exclaimed, "But Harry, it's CHRISTMAS! It's time to get up and open presents!"

Remus was quietly amused by Sirius' rambunctious and infectious good mood as Harry became equally excited once he was more awake. Sirius crawled under the tree and handed out presents.

Harry received a book on careers in the wizarding world from Hermione, a jumper from Mrs. Weasley, and a plant that sounded like it hummed a tune from Neville. He wasn't surprised to see nothing from Ron and tried not to be disappointed. Remus gave him a belt buckle that he was delighted to see held a stag as well as a book on Advanced Protections and Defensive Spells.

The werewolf was surprised and touched at the new wardrobe, protesting slightly but trying the new clothes on with evident pleasure. "Thank you both very much," he offered after seeing an image of a dignified professor in the mirror.

Sirius looked up from his carved figures to smile at his friend. "Look Moony, it's the three of us." He stroked the wood faces and smiled at the antics of their likenesses. Remus looked the carvings over carefully before adding, "These are exceptionally well-done, Harry. You have real talent." Harry couldn't help but blush at the praise.

Sirius turned back to Harry with an eager smile. "And now it's my turn, Harry!" He handed him a long box covered in red and gold paper. "Open, open, open," he chanted, squirming in anticipation.

Remus shook his head at his friend's excitement as Harry tore off the paper. Harry opened the box and gasped. "Sirius! But...but..."

"Do you like it? It's the newest broom on the market, a Firebolt. You mentioned that your roommate's fire lizard pretty much destroyed your broom by accident."

"It's brilliant!" Harry assured him. "Look at it! I'll bet this broom can make a Wronski Feint easier than ever!" He jumped up and gave his godfather the first hug he ever initiated himself. "Thank you!" All three of them ignored the suspiciously bright eyes that they shared.

After a big breakfast, Harry spent the morning flying and decided that the Firebolt was the best broom ever designed. He came in only reluctantly at lunch, not wanting to get off, especially with all the warming charms Remus had put on him. However, over lunch Sirius gave him something else to think about.

"Harry, I know I've mentioned something about getting a house near your school, but I didn't want to go too fast and make any assumptions about what you wanted. What do you think? Shall we go look at houses or is it too soon to think about it?"

Harry looked at his godfather and the hope he was trying but failing to hide behind a mask of indifference. He looked at the gentle werewolf and back to Sirius, examining his face in minute detail. Just as Sirius thought he would say no, the teen replied, "If you're sure you want me, I would love to have you nearby and be part of your family."

After several hugs and a few noisy minutes complete with nose-blowing, the trio contacted the wizarding realtor who found the rental cottage. He quickly pulled the available houses in the magical section of Stillwater. They found that many magical families were around Long Lake and accepted the keys to four houses and the apparation coordinates.

The first house was built in red brick with a grey slate roof, set on a lot that had been cleared of most of the surrounding trees. It had three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a nice study/library and a potions shed out back. However, the lots were rather small and "Too close to the neighbors" was Sirius' comment.

The second house was a white two-story colonial that boasted four bedrooms and three baths. However the kitchen was out-of-date and there was no study or library, something Sirius felt was a must. "The rooms don't seem to be laid out the best," noted Harry. "They seem a bit choppy, don't they?" The other two agreed and they moved on to the next house.

The third property was on five acres. The house had a great kitchen and a good-sized library, four bedrooms and four baths. Remus pointed out the natural hardwood floors and vaulted ceilings which gave the house character. Besides the house, the property included a stable for up to four horses and boasted a small 3 room guest cottage. "Now this is more like it," approved Sirius. "There's room for all of us and a couple of guests. The cottage could be for guests, or a studio." All of them agreed to put it on the short list.

The realtor put what he considered the best house at the bottom of the list, saving it for last. When they apparated in front of the house, they found it resembled a small manor house on the shore of Long Lake. It featured generous rooms with twelve foot ceilings, hardwood floors, and a newly updated kitchen. They entered into an impressive foyer and staircase that led to the second floor. The main floor hosted a living room with fireplace, a combined library/study, kitchen, dining room, sunroom, and French doors to the back. Upstairs featured three bedrooms with en suite baths and walk-in closets, as well as small balconies.

"I think I'm sold," exclaimed Sirius after examining the main floor and upstairs bedrooms. "Let's take a look downstairs first," advised the more cautious Remus.

The basement contained a family room, three more bedrooms and baths, and an exercise room that was also warded for spell work, making it a valuable addition. One of the bedrooms was designed with special ventilation and slate floors so that it could be converted to a potions labs if desired. Sirius looked over the realtor card. "The property has ten acres. This says it has a large flower garden in back plus an herb garden on the side of the house. Since I can't see it under the snow, I'll take his word for it."

He grinned at Remus and Harry. "What do you say? Have we found Black Manor?" With Remus' meticulous inspection and Harry's hopeful nod, they all agreed that it was perfect.

That night after Harry had gone to bed, Sirius poured a drink for himself and his friend. "You know Moony, you've been great these past few months. I don't know if I could have recovered so far without your help and support." He ignored his friend's depreciating noises. "Once you're done for the year at Hogwarts, I want to hire you. I need someone to help me as I try to work my way back into civilized society, especially one away from Britain. I need someone to help me oversee the Black fortune and to help with the Black seat on the Wizengamot. I don't want to have to port key there for every session."

Remus blinked and sipped his drink, trying to think through the request. It was a kind offer, and he didn't accept charity, but he knew that his friend did need help after more than a decade in Azkaban. "Have you considered asking your cousin Andromeda to be your proxy at the Wizengamot? As a solicitor, she could also take on the legal responsibilities for the House."

Sirius beamed a smile at him. "Now see, that's exactly what I need you for! To point out the things right in front of my face. That's a great idea!" The two friends began to outline plans for how to proceed once the year was finished at the beginning of summer.

After the winter break, Harry returned to school energized and ready to tackle the remainder of the year. He appreciated the growing friendship with Elias and the Templeton twins, and he was on friendly terms with several others, even though it didn't reach the same depth he had enjoyed with Hermione and Ron. But after being turned on by so many Hogwarts students, he was reluctant to open himself up again too soon.

The remainder of the school year passed quickly and soon year-end exams were upon them. Harry was proud to present his grades to Sirius. "Outstandings in Battle Magics, Charms and Transfiguration and EE's in every other class!" exclaimed his pleased godfather as he pulled the teen into a rough hug. "I'm so proud of you, Pup! Your parents would be proud as well."

"I'm especially happy with the EE in Potions," Harry replied. "I had to work so hard to try to catch up, but it's been worth it." He ignored but privately agreed with the "incompetent greasy git" comments from his godfather. "I also passed the exam for the first year of Arithmancy thanks to Ashwini's tutoring, and we're halfway through the next year. I'll keep working on that this summer."

"Not too hard," Sirius grinned. "We have a lot of fun planned for the summer! You and I have twelve years to make up for."

Shortly after the beginning of summer, Remus joined them at the new Black Manor. The three of them spent time decorating the new house, and then explored all of the summer time activities the area offered. They also visited several nearby communities as they traveled around the state. Harry continued with his Arithmancy studies, following a pre-written plan provided by Ashwini in addition to some pre-studying in biology and healing. Harry wanted to be sure to be ready to take those courses during the next term.

One morning late in the summer, Harry walked in to a very somber duo at the breakfast table. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Sirius and Remus glanced at each other. He frowned and added, "Come on, Padfoot, Moony...no secrets. That's what Dumbledore did and I hated it!"

Sirius grimaced, "Ouch, low blow Pup. Don't compare me to the old coot. OK, we just heard that one of the Order's members – from Dumbledore's old group – a former Auror by the name of Alastor Moody was kidnapped by former Death Eaters. From what the letter said, they used a particularly nasty ritual using the bone of You-Know-Who's father, blood from Moody as an enemy, and then the sacrifice of a body part by Barty Crouch Jr."

"A man who was supposed to be dead," threw in Remus. "Supposedly he died in Azkaban."

Sirius nodded and then continued. "The ritual gave You-Know-Who a new body. Moody was able to kill several Death Eaters, but they killed him. When the Aurors arrived to investigate all the Killing Curses being cast, they found Moody's ghost. He remained long enough to tell them how he was killed and about the ritual before he passed on."

Harry sat down heavily and rubbed his forehead in resignation. "So Voldemort is back again? I faced him my first two years at Hogwarts and have to say I didn't miss him last year. But now he's not just a spirit but alive again? Great, just great." He looked at both men. "Do you think he'll be content in England or is he going to be coming after me here?"

"We don't know, Pup. But we're going to strengthen the wards on the property. I've got some wards from the Black family that will rebuff anyone not approved by the ward holder. And St. Croix is very well protected. We'll make sure your Principal knows about this though."

The remainder of the summer was tense before the new school year began. Sirius and Remus cast every protective spell possible on the new house and property, and then hired the local Gringotts branch to add anything they could to it. They both also spent time spelling every piece of clothing Harry owned, to reflect curses, hexes and jinxes. "He's going to have every advantageous we can think of," said a fierce Sirius.

Harry was delighted to see that Hermione's parents agreed that another school might be better for her. Although he hoped she would join him at St. Croix, she and her parents agreed upon Magic and Spellcrafting Lyceum in Crete, Greece. Hermione was excited about their program on spell crafting and creating new spells. Although it lacked non-magical classes, Hermione's parents signed her up for extension classes offered on-line, since the Lyceum had warded rooms that permitted computers to work.

Once back at St. Croix Academy, Harry continued with his core classes, but added both Biology and Healing. He continued to share a room with Elias and the regal Xolotl and enjoyed the fire lizard's bossy manners. Hedwig was kept busy with weekly runs between the Manor and the school.

Remus sipped his breakfast tea and looked curiously as his friend glowered at a letter from England. "Something wrong, Padfoot?"

Sirius looked up from a missive from Andromeda. "Andy thinks that Dumbledore and Fudge are up to something, but she doesn't know what. The two have been contacting various members of the

Wizengamot privately, but she's been excluded as well as her block of supporters." He ran his hand through his hair and admitted, "It makes me nervous when Albus and Fudge do anything together."

Hedwig flew into the room and landed in front of Sirius and held out her leg. "Good girl," the man praised her and offered her a strip of bacon. He unfolded the letter and read, while sipping his tea. "Bollocks!" he shouted and spewed his tea across the table. Hedwig launched herself off the table and flew around the room before landing on Remus' chair, and glared at Sirius.

"Sorry Hedwig. Remus, listen to this."

Dear Sirius,

I just received a letter from Neville Longbottom and wanted to pass along some news. He said that he overheard a conversation between his Grandmother, Griselda Marchbanks and Tiberius Ogden regarding the threat of Voldemort. They all hold seats on the Wizengamot. Neville said that my name came up in discussions happening behind the scenes along with a proposal to bring me back to Britain! Neville's Gran and her two friends are against it and his Gran was furious that 'any responsible adult would propose involving a 14-year old boy in a war with a Dark Lord.' But it makes me nervous. I'll send a copy of the letter to Anarosa, just in case.

Have to run to class, but wanted to send this along first.

Harry

Letters and visits flew between Anarosa and the displaced Brits over the next few weeks. They weren't sure what Fudge and Dumbledore were planning, but they tried to prepare for any contingency. It didn't come as a surprise then, when Sirius received a letter with the seal of the Ministry of Magic several weeks later.

"Bah!" the man growled, sounding very much like his animagus form. "Listen to this, Moony. They're making 'an official' request to me as Harry's guardian to bring him to the Ministry of Magic for a meeting. Like that's going to happen! How stupid do they think we are?"

After conferring with Anarosa, Sirius responded briefly saying that it was inappropriate to withdraw the boy from his classes, but that they

would be willing to meet with the Minister at St. Croix Academy on a weekend convenient to them both.

After several terse notes from the Ministry with which Sirius refused to cooperate, a meeting was scheduled for a Saturday morning (late afternoon British time). Principal Graham permitted her office to be used and authorized the Floo in a secured room in the building to receive International visitors for a 10-minute period.

At eleven o'clock, Michael Talbot stood in the receiving room when the Floo flared green and two Aurors stepped out and stood on either side of the fireplace. "Vice Principal Talbot here on behalf of the Principal to greet our guests," he said easily to the Aurors.

One was a tall bald black man with a gold hoop earring in his right ear while the other was a tough-looking wizard with very short wiry grey hair. The black man spoke first, "Aurors Shacklebolt and Dawlish. The Chief Warlock and Minister will be coming through momentarily."

The Floo flared again and a tall, but thin elderly wizard with a long silver beard came through. He was wearing long robes and a purple cloak with high-heeled buckled boots. His blue eyes sparkled at Talbot behind half-moon spectacles. "Vice Principal Talbot, isn't it? Chief Warlock Albus Dumbledore, at your service," he said with aplomb. "I believe we are only waiting for Cornelius now."

Finally, the fireplace flashed for the last time, and a portly little man wearing a pin-striped suit and purple boots strode out. Talbot bowed slightly as he greeted their guest. "Welcome gentlemen. I'm Vice Principal Talbot of the St. Croix Academy. If you'll follow me, I'll show you the way to the Principal's office where we'll be meeting."

A brief walk brought them to the Principal's waiting room. "Gentlemen," began Michael Talbot, "As agreed upon, all wands and port keys must be left outside of her office for the duration of the meeting. There are no exceptions. Any attempt to bypass this restriction will result in the meeting being summarily ended." He opened a box that already held several wands, including a Holly wand that Albus recognized. With a nod, the other four men placed their wands and several brooches inside the box.

Sirius and Harry waited inside, along with Andromeda Tonks and Anarosa Diaz at the far side of the room furthest from the newcomers. Principal Graham stood next to a tall blond man dressed in an impeccable grey suit. Talbot began the introductions, "Principal Graham, may I introduce the British Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge, Chief Warlock Albus Dumbledore and Aurors Shacklebolt and Dawlish. Gentlemen, this is Principal Victoria Graham and her guest, Senator Daniel Anderson."

Fudge looked surprised and glanced briefly at Dumbledore before smiling congenially. "A pleasure to meet you both. I wasn't aware that we would have a representative of the government joining us today."

Senator Anderson stepped forward to shake hands with the Minister. "We would not fail to greet such an auspicious guest without proper ceremony, Mr. Minister, even in as small a setting as this. Your position demands that respect."

The small portly man preened at the perceived compliment. "Yes, of course. I would do the same, naturally." He turned towards Harry and made to take a step forward, but found himself intercepted by the Senator, who graciously guided him towards a comfortable chair.

After being seated, the Minister immediately tried to take control of the meeting. "Mr. Potter, it is a pleasure to meet you finally. Of course, we all know how you saved the day back in 1981."

Harry inclined his head briefly. "Minister Fudge, thank you for coming here today. I believe you know my godfather, Sirius Black and his cousin Andromeda Tonks of the Ancient and Noble House of Black." He waited for an embarrassed nod from the Minister before proceeding. "Permit me to introduce Mrs. Anarosa Diaz, my solicitor."

A brief smile twitched the corners of the Chief Warlock's lips as he recognized the woman from his previous meeting with Harry. The boy had a solicitor back then?

Once tea was offered and declined, the Minister gestured at Dumbledore. "I think you are the one who can best explain why we're here, Chief Warlock."

The elderly wizard sighed heavily as he glanced apologetically at both Harry and Sirius. "I'm afraid what I have to share isn't common knowledge, nor is it pleasant to hear. I'm sorry to have to share it at all. Back in 1979, I interviewed Sybil Trelawney for the Divination position and to my surprise, she actually gave a startling prophecy. She told me, "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives..."

He looked sadly at Harry again. "The prophecy could have fit you or Neville Longbottom. Both of your parents defied Voldemort multiple times and you were both born at the end of the seventh month. However, Voldemort sought you out first and marked you with that curse scar, making you his equal. I'm sorry to say Harry, that only you can defeat him."

The solemnity of the moment was disrupted by a loud derisive snort from Sirius. Andromeda laid a hand on his arm and said "I can understand your concern Chief Warlock, but it would appear to me that the prophecy was fulfilled when the Dark Lord was 'vanquished' in 1981 as Harry most certainly lived through the following years and is still alive since Voldemort's rebirth."

Cornelius Fudge tried to push down his irritation. Firstly he had to give up a Saturday night to travel to the United States to try to convince the teen to return to his mother country. The Boy-Who-Lived should be honoured to save his fellow witches and wizards! Now that irritating Black representative who continually thwarted him on the Wizengamot had the audacity to say the prophecy was fulfilled? "I'm sorry, but your interpretation is incorrect, Mrs. Tonks. Young Mr. Potter here is required to return to fulfill the prophecy." He sat back confident that he would have his way.

Anarosa spoke up next. "Would you please explain to me Minister Fudge just how Harry could be 'required' to fulfill anything as nebulous as a prophecy?"

"If I might..." began Dumbledore. At Fudge's nod he continued, "In 1716, Marcus Stone was the acknowledged object of a prophecy that stated that only he could cure a plague. He chose not to study

healing or potions to help fulfill the prophecy, and thousands of people died to the plague. As a result, in 1723 the Prophecy Compulsion Laws were enacted. These state that anyone directly involved in a prophecy that impacts others, can be compelled to ensure the prophecy is completed once it is set in motion."

Anarosa leaned forward in her chair and asked softly, "Are you saying that you have a law that enslaves and coerces your citizens? Even children?" She looked at both men with revulsion. "How can you live with yourself when you're trying to force a child to fight a mass murderer? You knew that Voldemort was a problem, but you failed to remove him from power and now want a fourteen year old to shield you from your own actions or lack thereof?"

There was an uncomfortable silence, before Fudge responded, "Your interpretation of events is not the common one, but I will respect your right to it. In the same way, you must respect our right to follow the laws of our country. Mr. Potter must return to Britain and he must fulfill the prophecy."

Sirius glared at the Chief Warlock who was looking at Harry and then away again. "Tell me, Albus, what else aren't you telling us? There is obviously more, besides trying to set a young untrained teenager against a seventy year old killer."

The elderly wizard nodded and then looked at Harry with grief-stricken eyes. "Harry, after you destroyed the diary in the Chamber of Secrets, I discovered it was a rather vile thing called a horcrux, or a soul anchor. I believe Voldemort has several more, but what is most heart-breaking is that I believe he created one in that scar of yours when he killed your mother. You reacted in the presence of Quirrell and I believe that your ability to speak parseltongue was absorbed when the horcrux was created." His voice was tender and regretful, "Harry my dear boy, Voldemort will never truly be destroyed unless all of his horcruxes are destroyed."

Anarosa answered for Harry, "Then you will be pleased to know that it wasn't a horcrux Headmaster, but a parasitic leech that permitted Voldemort to retain his wraith form. If anyone had bothered to have the injured child treated by a qualified Healer after the brutal murder of his parents that night, they would have discovered it wasn't a horcrux at all. The curse scar allowed the disembodied spirit to drain Harry's magic and life force to sustain it. If it had been treated

immediately, perhaps the spirit would never have been able to come back."

Harry lifted his bangs and showed the barely visible scar. "Besides being given nutrient potions my second day here, the dark magic in the scar was identified and specialists came to rid me of it. They transferred the leech to another creature and it is no more. Within hours, I felt better than I ever had." His eyes were bitter as he briefly met those of the Headmaster.

After an embarrassing silence the British visitors, Fudge demanded pompously, "Scar or not, we must insist that Mr. Potter be turned over to the Ministry of Magic to fulfill the prophecy according to the Law of 1723."

Andromeda responded, "Again Mr. Minister, we believe the prophecy was fulfilled in 1981. My suggestion is to get someone on the inside of Voldemort's terrorist organization to poison him, dose him with the Draught of Living Death, to lead him into an ambush, decapitate him or use any of a thousand ways to make sure he is incapacitated. The fight belongs to the Aurors, not Mr. Potter."

Fudge was irritable now as he spit out, "No! A quorum of the Wizengamot voted in special session to bind Mr. Potter to the Prophecy Compulsion Laws until Voldemort is permanently vanquished. That vote stands."

In the rising tension, Senator Anderson's calm voice was soothing. "Tell me Minister Fudge, how do you propose to force a citizen of the United States to become an indentured slave to Britain?"

Fudge's face turned purple as he blustered, "What? Harry Potter is a British citizen and under our jurisdiction!"

Andromeda Tonks smiled sweetly in satisfaction. "Perhaps if you had spoken to me as the Black proxy on the Wizengamot, you could have been saved this embarrassment. Harry James Potter renounced his British citizenship last year. He is a naturalized citizen of the United States of America. I know as I worked with Ms. Diaz on the paperwork."

Senator Anderson added calmly, "Needless to say, if you attempt to kidnap or otherwise coerce him, the full power of the U.S. Magical Government will move to protect one of our citizens."

Albus Dumbledore was stunned. He hadn't expected the teen to take such actions, but it would do him no good; he couldn't flee from his destiny. He said mildly, "A minor can't renounce citizenship."

Sirius smirked and spoke up for the first time. "Harry is emancipated, Albus. He has the standing of an adult in the United States."

Fudge bristled, "Our law preceded his change of allegiance!"

Andromeda maintained her composure, but her voice was clipped as she replied, "Irrelevant, Minister Fudge. He is a citizen of the United States of America. Do you really want to state that your government has the authority to enslave the citizens of other countries?"

Senator Anderson crossed his legs and leaned elegantly back in his chair as he templed his fingers. "I believe that I can say with the approval of the Magical President of the United States, that if the International Confederation of Wizards does not fervently oppose any country attempting to enslave the citizen of another country for any reason, the United States will withdraw from that organization and suspend diplomatic relations with any country supporting such an outrageous claim."

Sirius grinned maliciously at the disgruntled guests. "I believe our discussion is at an end, gentlemen."

"There are other horcruxes," began Dumbledore.

"So find and destroy them and then annihilate Voldemort. This is not Harry's fight and never should have been. He fulfilled the prophecy by "vanquishing" the self-named dark lord back in 1981."

Anderson added, "Surely in a country with as many adult wizards as Britain has, they can assemble a squad of hit wizards to take him out? If not, I'm sure the President would be willing to supplement your forces with our own forces. I would be pleased to discuss it with you Mr. Minister once Mr. Potter's group exits."

At a nearly invisible movement from Fudge, Dawlish stepped out glaring at the young teen, while Shacklebolt moved out more reluctantly. Sirius stood and pushed Harry behind him, as Anarosa and Andromeda stood on either side of him. Anderson said calmly, "Minister Fudge, is it your intention to start an international conflict between your country and the United States? If so, please be aware that this meeting is being monitored and our own Aurors are within the building waiting for my signal. Do you really want me to give it?" He stared at the portly minister with dispassionate eyes.

The portly man hadn't risen to Minister without recognizing a losing fight. "No," Fudge said curtly. "Stand down you two." He turned to Anderson and added, "Let's discuss what your government is willing to offer to help destroy this mad man."

"Of course, Minister," the blonde Senator deadpanned, "It would be an honour and a pleasure."

Boy-Who-Lives is Boy-Who-Flees

By Rita Skeeter

Harry Potter became the acclaimed Boy-Who-Lived after being the only person known to have survived the Killing Curse on Halloween night in 1981. His survival also heralded the defeat of the Dark Lord Voldemort. The boy then disappeared for the next decade, only reappearing in the public eye when he began his education at Hogwarts.

"He was always a trouble-maker," said former classmate Draco Malfoy. "He received special privileges, like having a broom and playing on his House Quidditch team in his First Year, something none of the other students were permitted."

"He was frightening in Second Year," confided Pansy Parkinson, a young woman in the same year group. "He's a Parselmouth, you know, and everyone thought he was the Heir of Slytherin. I'm not surprised that he would abandon the good witches and wizards of Britain like he did."

"Harry Potter chose to transfer to another school after his Second Year," admitted Headmaster Albus Dumbledore. "We can only wish him the best for now."

"Young Mr. Potter chose to transfer to the St. Croix Academy in the United States," disclosed Auror John Dawlish. "He was asked to return to help with the current crisis with You-Know-Who, but steadfastly refused with the full support of his Godfather, former convict Sirius Black."

This reporter learned that a special session of the Wizengamot met in secret to vote on compelling Mr. Potter to return to Britain. It was later learned that the Boy-Who-Lived renounced his citizenship and became a citizen of the United States.

One can only hope that Mr. Potter has not chosen to refuse his help because he is offering it to the Dark Lord. Perhaps the citizens of Britain can help turn the Boy-Who-Lived from the dark path he is choosing to follow.

OoOoOoOo

Chapter 9 – Fallout

John Dawlish rapped sharply on the door of the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement Amelia Bones and received a curt "Enter". He strode into the office and stood in front of her desk, waiting for her acknowledgement.

The square-jawed witch had an open folder on her desk and looked at each paper, before turning it over and reviewing the next. Dawlish forced himself not to twitch with impatience at being ignored, but kept his back straight and his eyes just over the woman's shoulder.

After looking at every paper in the file, Amelia Bones closed the folder and leaned back in her chair. She examined Dawlish through her monocle as if she had never seen him before.

"I've looked at every paper in your file Dawlish, and I can't find it," she finally said grimly.

Dawlish met her eyes. "Ma'am?"

"Whose responsibility is it to speak with the press, Auror Dawlish?"

The blond swallowed but said impassively, "Yours ma'am".

"Quite right; the Head of the DMLE or my designated representative. I don't see any promotion notices in your file, Dawlish and I'm quite certain that I did not request you to speak to the press for me." She picked up a dagger from her desk and began idly flipping it from hand to hand.

Dawlish's eyes unconsciously followed the movement of the dagger. The older aurors liked to regale the younger members of how the dagger was a souvenir she acquired after a dark wizard sent it at her with a spell. The story was that she caught it mid-air and then proceeded to disembowel the wizard with it. "No ma'am" he remembered to say. Was she eyeing his groin while flipping that dagger? He forced himself not to cover his bits.

"Then perhaps you will explain to me why one of my aurors violated protocol, disclosed the location of a sought after celebrity and referred to an innocent man as a former convict."

He was quite certain the dagger was now targeting his groin and struggled to maintain a steady voice. "The Minister of Magic strongly suggested I speak with Ms. Skeeter...." At her icy glare, he ended the statement with "...I have no excuse ma'am."

"No, I didn't think so. Auror Dawlish, please pack up your desk and hand your current assignments to Auror Shacklebolt. You are hereby reassigned to the Auror Academy as the assistant to Alastor Gumboil."

Dawlish tried not to sway at the news. The former hit wizard? His assistants were the targets of his demonstrations and tended to have long hospital visits. The dagger was now pointing at him and he swallowed hard. "Yes ma'am. Thank you, ma'am" and made his escape.

Neville Longbottom looked up as the normal mail delivery seemed to have hundreds of extra owls flooding the Great Hall at Hogwarts. The young teen noticed that every student and teacher received a feathered delivery even as he untied a newspaper from the first bird in front of him. Another owl waited patiently for its letter to be retrieved. He unfolded the newspaper to discover it was a copy of the New York Daily Herald out of the United States. The front page headline was brutally eye-stopping.

British Ministry of Magic Attempts to Enslave 14-Year Old Boy

A shocking story of political intrigue, callousness, and abuse came to light this week when 14-year old Harry Potter, the only known survivor of the Avada Kedavra (Killing) Curse spoke out about his life.

Within hours of the deaths of his parents, James and Lily Potter in 1981, fifteen month old Harry was left on his non-magical relative's doorstep without going through standard magical or non-magical Children's Services. That meant no one supervised the boy's home life for the next decade; a decade he spent living in a closet under the stairs when not acting as the cook and housekeeper. The boy was malnourished and small for his size, dressed only in the many times too-large cast-offs from his cousin.

"I was told that my parents were worthless drunks who died in a car accident," he said dispassionately, "and that it would have been

better if I had died with them. I began cooking when I was four or five," he recalled. "They put a chair in front of the stove and I cooked standing on the chair. I had a list of chores every day and if they weren't done on time or to my relative's satisfaction, then I didn't earn my meal for the day."

"I knew nothing of the magical world, the customs, traditions or any part of my heritage because my relatives loathed everything to do with magic. All I knew was not to ask questions, to stay invisible, and to take care of myself. When I received my Hogwarts letter, I had no idea what I was in for. It was a shock to discover that I was some type of celebrity. It amazed me that people saw me as someone special when it was obviously something that my parents did that vanquished Voldemort (the dark wizard who had been terrorizing the British community) and saved me."

"During my first year at Hogwarts, I was truly amazed. The school is in a thousand-year old castle, complete with ghosts, moving staircases and portraits. Unfortunately, our Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher was possessed by the spirit of Voldemort. The man actually had Voldemort's face sticking out of the back of his head, hidden beneath a turban. He let a fully grown mountain troll in the school that nearly killed one of my friends. He also tried to kill me multiple times during the school year, but we couldn't prove who it was until he finally cast the Killing Curse at me near the end of the year. Fortunately, my parent's protection held and he was defeated again."

Such a traumatic year would cripple most eleven year olds or at least require extensive counseling, but Mr. Potter was returned to his non-magical relatives where he was locked into a room with bars on the windows. "My best friend and his brothers broke me out," the boy said with a warm smile, "and I spent the rest of the summer with their family. It was really great."

In his second year, the now twelve year old was discovered to be a Parselmouth. "I have no idea why being able to speak to reptiles is considered evil," he said with some confusion. "To me it sounds just like English. I don't mind being judged on my actions, but just because I can understand another language? I was pretty much shunned by the majority of the school when it became known."

If the school hadn't judged his abilities so rashly, the sixty-foot basilisk loose in the school that year might have been found earlier. Although the boy didn't know what kind of reptile he occasionally heard speaking as it moved in the pipes, he had learned by then not to mention anything about hearing snakes. Fortunately, none of the school children saw the basilisk's eyes straight on; they saw reflections in water or mirrors or through camera lenses. Students were petrified rather than killed, but surprisingly the school was left open for weeks after the first attacks occurred. Ultimately, a mandrake potion was made that restored the children.

Eventually, Mr. Potter discovered that the basilisk was being controlled by yet another incarnation of Voldemort. "This time, it was a memory of himself that he left inside of a book," said the teen. "It possessed the little sister of my friend and was draining her life. I was able to find her location and killed the basilisk by sticking a sword through its mouth."

What he didn't reveal until questioned was that he was bitten in the attempt and would have died had it not been for the tears of the Headmaster's phoenix. Mr. Potter took the fang that broke off in his arm and stabbed the book, destroying the memory Voldemort and saving his friend's sister.

After being returned yet again to his relatives, the not yet 13-year old boy decided it was time he looked out for his own safety and well-being. His relatives approved his transfer to another school with the understanding that he never return to them. By mid-summer of last year, he was ensconced at St. Croix Academy in the United States.

Unfortunately, the child was not yet secure. The followers of Voldemort used a dark ritual to bring him back from a disembodied spirit to corporeal form ready to once again terrorize the British population. Imagine Mr. Potter's surprise when he received a visit from the British Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, accompanied by Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot Albus Dumbledore and two aurors. They revealed that in a special session of the Wizengamot, the responsible adults of the ruling body voted to bind the now 14-year old boy under an obscure 300-year old prophecy law. The men demanded that this child be surrendered to save them, rather than relying on the aurors, Ministry and trained adults who are tasked with protecting the public.

In a surprise move, Mr. Potter's attorney, Ms. Anarosa Diaz revealed that the teen had sought and received political asylum from the United States government the previous year. He subsequently renounced his British citizenship and in special proceedings was awarded U.S. citizenship this year, making any Wizengamot votes irrelevant.

"I would have been happy to remain a citizen of the United Kingdom," said the grim teen, "if they would only have let me grow up. But I was abandoned, abused, and barely survived repeated murder attempts. Then they wanted to enslave me to a prophecy; a prophecy that my advisors contend was fulfilled when Voldemort was defeated back in 1981."

"I can only say how grateful I am to my attorney, my teachers, my godfather and the U.S. government for their unwavering support. To understand the mindset that we were battling, consider that my godfather was unjustly imprisoned without a trial for over a decade and publicly exonerated but was described as 'a former convict' in the British publication, The Daily Prophet. In response to their other comments, I will state as clearly as I know how that I do not support Voldemort in any manner or form, in thought or word, by magic or non-magical deed. Furthermore, I trust the trained professionals in the Aurors and the Ministry to handle the current situation in Britain."

The British Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, and the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, Albus Dumbledore were unavailable for comments.

Neville's round face became downright malicious when he smirked, Ron thought. "What's up, mate?" the redhead asked.

"I thought Harry's interview was well-done," Neville replied as he opened a letter from his overseas friend. He scanned the letter and then added "Apparently it was his Godfather who decided to send us all a copy of the article; something about a prank on the Headmaster." The nearby Gryffindors looked up at the head table and noticed all of the teachers were reading the overseas paper with evident interest, even the Potions Master although his face was twisted in a sneer.

"What else does he say," asked Seamus.

"Hmm, Sirius also sent a copy to everyone in the Ministry and forwarded dozens to pubs and restaurants." He continued scanning the letter. "Unfortunately, the slander and libel laws require that the reporter deliberately and with malice of forethought attempt to publicly defame the subject and Black's attorney isn't certain they can prove that. However Harry says that his godfather 'recently discovered an interest in investing in various publications and is seeking controlling interest in several publishing houses, magazines and newspapers'. Heh, that should be effective."

"I can't believe they published his location when You-Know-Who has him targeted" hissed an outraged Ginny Weasley from a few seats down.

"Yes," Neville agreed as he read the end of the letter, "it seems that because of that he's been receiving thirty or more letters a day from strangers who have alternated between insulting his character, his morals, his courage, his loyalty and his obligations and those who demand or plead with him to return to Britain to stand between them and Voldemort." The Gryffindor rolled his eyes as some students gasped at his saying the name.

Seamus grinned, "Well, I think he was brilliant when he said 'I trust the trained professionals in the Aurors and the Ministry to handle the current situation in Britain'. Who can argue with that attitude?"

Ron frowned at his copy of the newspaper and then looked at his dorm mate. "Neville, do me a favor and warn Harry to be careful accepting food or drink from others in the next few weeks, OK?"

"Why don't you write him yourself," asked the surprised teen.

Ron's face reddened, highlighting his freckles. "I wasn't a very good friend last year, was I? But you've been constant, haven't you? I think it would be better from you. Just warn him, all right mate?"

The students continued the discussion and the Great Hall echoed with the many conversations. Dumbledore's eyes were not twinkling with their usual good humour when he completed the article, but he simply closed the paper and sipped his tea again, doing his best to ignore the heated glare from his Deputy Headmistress. He wondered how long he was going to avoid being hexed by the irate Scotswoman.

The Headmaster was surprised to hear the Potions Master mutter "Who would have believed that a Gryffindor much less a Potter could be so entertaining or so delightfully devious?"

Harry glanced over his shoulder as he felt Elias pass through the wards on their room and gave his roommate a brief smile. After a 12th grade student had cast a Reducto at him several days ago, Ms. Sadler had insisted on a few extra protections on his room. It turned out the older student was a cousin of former followers of Voldemort, and he had received an order from his family patriarch to "take out" the younger teen. Harry escaped with only a scrape thanks to the dragon hide armor he wore under his clothes, but it had shaken him for several days.

"Xolotl has been waiting for you," he said to his roommate with an indulgent smile towards the reptile. "Something about wanting bananas, a warm bath and a belly rub in that order."

The fire lizard grumbled from his cage, "My Boy isss getting lax; he ssshould have been here earlier to give me a massssage and fresssh bananass. You tell him that he isss getting negligent and ssshould be grateful for my leniencccy, sspeaker!"

Harry turned in his chair to grin at Elias, but his grin dropped when he saw the wand in his friend's hand pointed at his head and the emptiness in his brown eyes. "Elias? What are you doing?"

With a loud screech and a tangle of wings, claws and feathers, Hedwig attacked the hand holding the wand. Harry's wand was in his hand immediately. "Incarcerous!" the teen shouted and ropes wrapped themselves around his roommate.

He opened the door to the hall and yelled "Someone get Ms. Sadler up here, now!" He kicked Elias' wand away and stroked a trembling Hedwig. "Thank you, girl. You're such a brave heroine, aren't you?" He continued caressing the white feathers for both of their comfort.

Christina Sadler came into the room at a run and the other students on the floor crowded around the room peering in. "Harry, what happened?"

"It's Elias, I think he's under a spell. He turned his wand on me and his eyes were just...blank and vacant looking." He looked up at the older woman. "I have no idea what he was going to do, but Hedwig attacked him and I was able to tie him up."

"All right, the show is over. The rest of you return to what you were doing." She closed the door behind her to the dismay of the students trying to get a glimpse into the room. She ran a set of diagnostic spells over the bound child and shook her head in dismay. "Harry, I'm going to use a medical port key to bring Elias directly to the Clinic. Why don't you contact your godfather? I'm sure you could use his support right now."

Two hours later, Harry sat in an office with Sirius, Principal Graham, Vice Principal Talbot, Ms. Sadler and Healer Masuto while Elias was in the Infirmary being comforted by his parents. "It was the Imperius curse," confirmed Mrs. Graham. "Elias doesn't remember anything about who cast it; it was likely cast from behind while he was outside of the school wards. He only remembers the floating sensation with a general euphoria. We believe his orders were to cast the Imperius on you, Harry, to cause you to leave the school wards. Obviously whoever set the compulsion didn't know our wards wouldn't permit the spell to be cast on the campus grounds."

Harry looked down at his hands and gripped them tightly to keep them from trembling. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Graham. I never wanted any other student hurt. Should I leave the Academy?" He felt Sirius' arm settle around his shoulders and allowed himself to lean into the comforting warmth of his godfather.

"I don't believe we need to take that drastic of a step yet, Harry," the Principal stated quietly. "While we have found a few less than savory reporters and a small number of other strangers nosing around the school grounds, it only led us to strengthen and reinforce all of the wards. The so-called Unforgiveables as well as all known compulsion curses have been disabled and will result in the caster being incapacitated if they are attempted. Port keys will not work under our wards unless created by me or Mr. Talbot, and I can guarantee you that both of us can throw off the Imperius."

"I can teach you spells to cast on all of your food and drinks, Pup" said Sirius. "The Blacks had quite a long and dark history and one never knew when poison or other potions might be brought into play."

We had to prove we knew how to check food before we were let out of the nursery."

"While a prudent skill to learn, it shouldn't be necessary," commented Principal Graham. "Each meal is served only after being selected by the student. Unless the entire kitchen was compromised, the food should be safe." She offered a half-hearted smile to the concerned godfather and added, "the house elves have told me they are watching the kitchens, the dining rooms, the chairs, the dishes, and everything else Harry might come in contact with. They take their oaths to protect their charges very seriously."

Harry felt humbled at the friendly house elves efforts on his behalf. "I should stop by the kitchen and thank them," he noted and blushed at his Residence Supervisor's look of approval. Sirius tousled his hair, increasing his embarrassment.

"If you can still blush, then all isn't grey and dismal," his godfather said, "although I prefer the embarrassment to come from my own pranks. I guess I'll just have to work harder." He winked at Harry who groaned and covered his face.

Rita Skeeter fumed in her small office at the Daily Prophet. How dare the Editor complain about her story! So what if she made sly innuendos or posed difficult questions. Her readers ate it up! And he had the audacity to say that the paper's publishing policies were being reviewed? That she might have to change her approach?

She drew the morning's mail towards her and began sorting it. She growled and crumpled a note from a reader who questioned her comments into a ball before casting Incendio on it. Stupid readers. The next had a box with it, and she drew her wand to check it carefully for hexes. One could never be too careful. Finding nothing hidden, she unwrapped the box and found a note and a box of Honeydukes Finest Chocolates. She opened the box and bit into a chocolate truffle. Now that was much better. She unfolded the note as she enjoyed the rich chocolate flavor.

Dear Miss Skeeter,

I read your most recent story about Harry Potter with interest. What would we ever do without you to point out the hidden foibles of our heroes and would-be celebrities? One cannot trust the judgment of

the average citizen, so we are fortunate that you stand willing to draw those conclusions for us.

Your Devoted Fan

She selected another of the velvety treats and bit into the white ganache. Now this was the reason she wrote, for the little people that appreciated her efforts. She dreamily ate her way through most of the box before a tempus charm sounded letting her know it was time for her next appointment. She slid the box of chocolates into her lime green handbag and hurried off.

"What a pleasure to speak with you, Madame Umbridge" the reporter said twenty minutes later looking at the squat woman behind the desk with apparent fascination.

"Minister Fudge likes to be sure the members of the press have unfettered access to those that can share the Ministry's views and perspectives" the other woman simpered, her jowls quivering.

"Yes, of course he does, especially when I cause so many problems for his opponents. Of course, I would be just as happy to cause problems for him if I could find a juicy enough story. Nothing like a good scandal to increase the readership, you know."

The dark eyes bulged even further on the florid face. "Excuse me? I don't believe I heard you correctly."

"Oh of course you did, dear. Scandal is what sells papers. What scandal would you like to reveal today? Is it true that your family somehow bred with the toad people of Transylvannia?" Her green quill began scratching furiously across the parchment.

The ugly face behind the desk began turning interesting shades of red and purple. "Now see here, you...you..."

"So tell me, what about the rumors that you're sharing an illicit love nest with the Minister? Is that how you reached your exalted position?"

A harsh cry was heard across the floor as Dolores Umbridge shrieked "Aurors! Someone call the Aurors! Arrest this...person!"

In the flurry of accusations and resulting chaos, no one realized that a box of chocolates in Rita's handbag dissolved, leaving nothing behind but the faint hint of a delicious aroma.

Chapter 10 – Tea with Amelia

It took several days before Elias and Harry were able to get back to their normal relationship. Elias was overwhelmed with feelings of anger and humiliation at being violated with the Imperius curse. "I should have been able to throw it off," he muttered to Harry after giving him a heart-felt apology.

"Most adults can't dispel it, Elias" comforted Harry. "That's why it's called an Unforgiveable. But perhaps we can ask Mrs. Archer to help us learn how to overcome it in Battle Magics?"

Even with Harry's forgiveness, Elias entered a period of depression, barely making it through his classes, and scarcely remembering to give Xolotl fresh food and water each morning. The iguana-fire lizard hybrid tolerated it for two days before grousing protests to Harry.

"Ssspeaker, why isss my Boy ssad? He doesss not sssmile. He doess not pet me. He doess not talk to me. Hasss ssssomeone hurt my Boy?" The last was hissed with predatory anger.

"Someone cast a spell on him, Xolotl. It took his will away from him and made him try to hurt me. He is hurt and betrayed, angry and afraid it might happen again. We must be patient with him."

"You be patient with him Ssspeaker. I will help him." The fire lizard's eyes burned red for a moment. "Although you will be permitted to assissst me." He began to hiss his instructions to Harry, whose eyes widened as his mouth began to twitch.

When Elias wandered morosely into their room after dinner, his eyes flicked over Xolotl's glass cage, moved on and then returned. "Xolotl! Where are you?" He turned panicked eyes to Harry, "Xolotl isn't in his cage!"

Harry pointed a finger and a hiss came from the behind one of the pillows on Elias' bed. The boy took a step forward and then stopped in astonishment as a white paws poked out from under the pillow. The two paws dragged more of an unfamiliar body out from under the pillow and large white ears with pink lining showed up. Dragging himself further, Xolotl pulled the rest of his body out from under the pillow and deliberately turned his back to his Boy, revealing the white powder puff tail, which he wiggled at the stunned teen.

"He...he's..." Elias seemed too stunned to talk. "He's wearing a bunny costume!"

The fire lizard stood up on his back legs and attempted to hop across the bed, tumbling over on to his back. He wiggled the tail at Elias again and little white paws smoothed the large white ears. "He's in a bunny costume!" the boy repeated, his lips twitching at the sight of his regal fire lizard pretending to be a fluffy bunny.

Encouraged by the smile, Xolotl again attempted to stand and hop across the bed. Elias caught him as he lost his balance again and lay on the bed with the bunny lizard on his chest. "Look at you...you're cute!" A laugh erupted out of his chest and up his throat, and continued until he gasped for air.

"Oh my word, how did you talk him into that, Harry? I haven't laughed so hard in...I don't know how long." The bright smile on his roommate's face brought a duplicate to the former Gryffindor's face.

"It's all Xolotl's idea. He said you were sad and needed cheering up and graciously permitted me to assist him."

"Aww, Xolotl, thank you." The teen stroked the fire lizard gently. "I've been neglecting you, haven't I? How about a nice steamy bath and a belly rub, hmm?"

Harry translated his comments and the fire lizard sighed happily. "Sssilly humanssss. Sssso much trouble for nothing, and sssso easssy to make you happy." He nudged his Boy's fingers and wriggled luxuriously under the attention. "Tell my Boy I accept his offering, but want a few dropsss of oil in the water. My sssskin is feeling dry." Elias accepted the additional demands with a smile and carried his bunny-lizard towards the bathroom.

Harry grinned and turned back to his letter from Sirius.

Not that I know anything about it, but I heard that the Daily Prophet gossip writer, Rita Skeeter ran into a few difficulties. Something about being gifted with chocolates that made her publicly discuss some of the most creative scandals her putrid mind could imagine. Apparently, many of her stories over the years are being reviewed by a team of solicitors. The word on the street is that there might be

a "class action lawsuit" from many of her victims over the years. How do you suppose such an American concept made it across the pond?

Remus sends his love (he's feeling a bit Hufflepuff tonight).

Your Dogfather,

Padfoot

Harry grinned at Sirius' prank on Rita Skeeter. Without knowing anything about him, she had written a thoroughly nasty article that caused him to be flooded with letters until he finally put additional filters on his mail ward. Now, Sirius had hired someone to respond to anything that wasn't from someone on his recognized list.

He turned to the next letter and smiled as he recognized Hermione's tidy penmanship.

Dear Harry,

I was appalled at hearing what the British Ministry of Magic tried to do. What were they thinking trying to force a 14-year old into facing a Dark Lord? I was especially disappointed to learn that Professor Dumbledore was involved. I used to have such respect for him. And then to have your own roommate put under the Imperius curse! How frightening for him and for you! Thank goodness for Hedwig!

After everything that happened to you, I am especially pleased that I transferred to MaSL. I love everything about the school, from the building (designed to be similar to the Parthenon) to the classes and the students. Non-Greek students are given potions that help us learn Greek five times faster than normal, and I'm well on my way to being fluent. I've been trying to study Latin at the same time to make full use of the potion!

I learned my lesson at Hogwarts, and don't raise my hand in class until after counting to ten. That seems to be working pretty well. They have a Divination class here, but it's taught by an Oracle from Delphi. A real Oracle! It more about history and the tools of divination, and I find it fascinating.

I think my very favorite class is spell-crafting. It takes research, creativity and being able to think in new ways about problems. I hope to be able to keep taking this class series through graduation and possibly beyond. I want to see how this could be used in a career; perhaps with warding, curse-breaking or even something like the Unspeakables in Britain.

Write soon and tell me what you're studying in each of your classes. I'm interested in comparing the two schools.

Missing you,

Hermione

Harry made a mental note to copy his class notes for her and was glad he learned that duplication spell last year. That made it easier. He turned to the next letter and stared at the messy scrawl. Now this was a surprise. He slowly opened the letter and read.

Harry,

You probably don't want to hear from me, and I don't blame you. I wasn't a very good friend to you last year. I was hurt that you left me instead of thinking about how everything affected you and that you really weren't safe at Hogwarts. That was selfish of me and it took me all year to realize that. Yeah, I'm a slow learner.

I just wanted to warn you to watch out who you accept food or drink from after everything that was written in the Daily Prophet. Also, wickedly brilliant rebuttal in the New York paper; excellent strategy.

Stay safe,

Ron Weasley

A slow smile broke across the young teen's face as he finished the letter. He folded it back inside the envelope and stared at packet for several minutes. "Will wonders never cease" he murmured.

Albus Dumbledore was having a bad day. First someone hexed him to bleat like an old goat. He suspected Minerva, but couldn't prove it. Next he found tin cans and old shoes on his plate for breakfast, and had to banish it before any of the students noticed. Then he

received a screeching howler from Molly Weasley with the morning mail. He thought he had redirected all howlers to his office where no one would hear them, but somehow she slipped a particularly virulent one through the wards accusing him of attempting to enslave an already abused child; a child who was abused because he had abandoned said child to those abusers. By the time the howler finally burned itself out, the students were staring at him in wide-eyed horror, as if he were a Dark Lord rather than the Leader of the Light.

The elderly wizard rubbed the bridge of his nose with tired resignation. Thank goodness Amelia Bones was coming to tea today, he thought. They had worked together for many years and she understood that not everything was in black and white, but shades of grey. She understood that sometimes very hard choices had to be made, no matter how painful. Seeing her would be the bright spot of his day.

At precisely 4:00 PM, the Floo in his office flared and Amelia Bones stepped out. Her close-cropped grey hair and square jaw reinforced her serious no-nonsense personality.

"Amelia, my dear, what a pleasure to see you," said Dumbledore jovially. "Please sit down. I'm so pleased to see you today." With a wave of his hand, the Headmaster used wandless magic to pour them each a cup of the steaming tea. "Please help yourself to the cakes and biscuits. I believe the house elves included lemon tarts today."

The two sipped tea for a few minutes and Dumbledore felt himself begin to relax. "What brings you here today, Amelia? Would you like to see your niece? I believe the Hufflepuffs have Potions at this time."

Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, leaned forward and put her cup down. "I'm here to speak with you, Albus. I thought it would be better to do so here in your office than officially in mine."

The wizard felt his headache begin again, but forced himself to respond in his most disarming grandfatherly voice, "Of course my dear. I am always at your service. How may I be of assistance?"

Amelia reached into her pocket and withdrew a shrunken briefcase, which she restored with a soft-spoken spell. She withdrew a parchment and an Auror's quill and lay the two items aside. "Begin recording," she commanded and the quill lifted itself. "Amelia Bones speaking with Albus Dumbledore in the Headmaster's office, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry." She confirmed that the quill recorded her words verbatim and then turned a serious eye on to the older wizard.

"Please explain to me how and why Harry Potter was removed from his parent's home after their deaths and placed with his Muggle relatives."

Albus sighed heavily. "The Potters and Longbottoms were at risk because of a prophecy that was partially overheard by a Death Eater. 'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ...' That was as much as Voldemort's follower overheard. The only two Light families with children due at the end of July were the Longbottoms and Potters. When James and Lily Potter were killed, Voldemort was vanquished through a blood sacrifice of Lily's. I could transfer that protection to a home as long as he was with someone who shared his mother's blood."

"And you choose not to involve Children's Services for what reason?"

The wizard's voice was soft and persuasive, "I was afraid for the child's safety from remaining Death Eaters, especially any who might be unmarked. I didn't know how compromised the Ministry might be at the time and believed it would be too easy to leak his location if it was known."

"It didn't occur to you that the Potters might have made other arrangements for their child? That they might have wanted him raised in a magical home and brought up knowledgeable in the Potter heritage? That you may have been violating their rights as parents to guide the destiny of their son?"

Dumbledore leaned forward, and his tone was sincere as he responded, "I thought there was plenty of time for that type of training and that it was more important for the child to live to reach school age."

"So ignoring whether your decision coincided with the boy's parents, is it correct to say that for ten years, the child was not monitored? That there was no trained personnel to supervise his placement, health and safety?"

"No, actually I asked Arabella Figg to move into the neighborhood to keep an eye on the boy for me. I did try to do my best for him, Amelia. I have always tried to do my best for any child."

"Was Arabella Figg trained in Children's Services? In how to monitor a child for abuse? Does she know if a child is within the normal percentile for height and weight? Does she know to look for hidden bruises, sleeplessness, and fear?"

"No, I admit that she wasn't professionally trained, but she was a considerate and compassionate woman. And like me, she honestly believed that Family would do their duty towards Family."

Amelia stared at the older wizard for several long moments until the silence became uncomfortable, but it was a tactic he was familiar with and kept silent, simply reinforcing his grandfatherly image. "All right, Headmaster, let's move on. When the child finally escaped his abusive relatives and reached the safety of Hogwarts, wasn't he malnourished and small for his age?"

"While he did appear small, he didn't appear to be mistreated. He seemed like every other child, eager to learn magic."

"I see. Is it true that Mr. Potter asked not to be returned to the Dursleys when the first school year was over?"

"Amelia, you must understand. He didn't say he was being abused. I believed he didn't want to give up magic for the summer. If he had said anything, I would have investigated."

"Isn't just the fact that a child asks not to be returned to his family cause for investigation?"

"To my everlasting regret, it never occurred to me that he was being mistreated."

"You will be pleased to know that the Aurors do investigate suspicions and reports, Albus, whether they have credibility or not. It is our duty, especially towards children."

"What do you mean?"

"The Dursleys have already been visited by investigative Aurors. They found proof that the child spent the better part of his life living inside a locked closet. His cousin admits that "the freak" would be locked in for days without food or loo privileges. Veritaserum proved that his Aunt loathed and feared him and his Uncle not only despised him, but felt it was reasonable to work him like an adult starting when he was only seven years old."

Albus pinched the bridge of his nose and looked pained. "Harry never said anything specific to me."

"Anyone trained in the field would know that abused children feel responsible for their own abuse. Their abusers have trained them to believe they deserve it."

Albus didn't respond, but just closed his eyes as if he couldn't bear to think of it. "Moving on," Amelia said, "why don't you tell me why Quirrell's possession and death wasn't reported to the Aurors?"

The Headmaster sighed heavily again and spoke softly, "I was honestly trying to protect Harry. I didn't think the poor boy needed to be traumatized by the press and Aurors. It wasn't as they we had proof of anything."

"We could have reviewed the boy's memories in a pensieve, Albus. Surely you should have remembered that."

The elderly wizard didn't respond. "All right then, tell me about the murder attempts on the boy over the years and why none of them were reported to the DMLE."

"I think it is a bit of an exaggeration to call them murder attempts, Amelia."

"Is it, Albus? Is that the same degree of exaggeration that you believed when the boy begged not to be returned to the Dursleys?" The elderly wizard looked pained. "So what do you call it when

someone hexes a broom to throw off an eleven year old when he is one hundred feet above the ground if it's not a murder attempt? What do you call being physically attacked by something capable of killing unicorns if it isn't a murder attempt? What about when the child was attacked at the end of your 'trial of horrors'?"

"I agree that Voldemort did attempt to kill Harry, but Quirrell died immediately thereafter, the shade fled and we had no proof other than Quirrell's body."

"The DMLE has professional investigators, Albus. We could have had pensieve memories. We could have prepared for Voldemort's return immediately. Perhaps Alastor Moody wouldn't have died if you had only shared information rather than believing you are the only one capable of understanding and acting upon said knowledge."

The sad blue eyes met her cool grey ones with heartfelt emotion. "I didn't want to start a public panic, nor did I want to alert his followers too early. My sole motivation was for the greater good of society; to protect the greatest number of people and harm the fewest."

"And who decided what the greater good was?"

There was silence in the office. "So you decided, you acted, and a child was abused at the home you chose for him and then repeatedly harmed while under your care at school."

"Isn't that a bit harsh, Amelia? I have always tried to protect the children."

"Then perhaps you can explain to me, speaking as one of the Board of Governors, why we weren't informed after the first child was petrified two years ago so that the school could be closed until the menace was found."

"If I had had any reason to believe it was a basilisk, I would have closed the school immediately. But the cat and then the first child were petrified not killed, and there was no known creature that did that. As long as they were only petrified and we were certain the mandrake root would restore them, I thought it was better to try to provide the children as stable and normal a life as possible."

Amelia glowered at the Headmaster with cold eyes that promised him no quarter. "Albus, in my role as the Head of the DMLE, I have to say that you violated many laws and procedures in regards to Mr. Potter, laws that you were sworn to uphold as the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. You decided that you were above the law because you saw the "bigger picture" and the "greater good". By acting as you did, you violated the trust of the Wizengamot and the rest of the citizens of Britain." She reached into her briefcase and pulled out a thick packet of parchment papers. "I am going to offer you a one-time plea bargain, Albus. If you resign from your positions on the Wizengamot and the ICW by the end of the week, then I will not press charges, but that agreement will be documented in your file."

She handed him the documents and ignored his shocked expression. "In addition, as a member of the Board of Governors, you should be aware that you will be interviewed on your conduct at the next monthly meeting. Albus, I think you spread yourself too thin and forgot what was most important. If the children are our future and the most important thing, then perhaps you should consider spending time in the classroom rather than hidden in this office. I strongly encourage you to accept the offer before you, Albus. Recording off." The quill stopped scratching and lay on the long scroll of parchment that contained their discussion.

Albus looked carefully at the woman before him and was reminded that she had been considered one of the greatest witches of her time, as well as a highly skilled duelist. "You have given me much to think about, Amelia," he offered. "I will need to review my actions from a different perspective. Will you give me a week?"

Amelia stood up, shrunk her briefcase and stored it in a pocket. "One week, Albus. At the end of that week, charges will be filed if the agreement is not signed." With a nod of her head, she grasped some Floo powder, called the Ministry of Magic, and disappeared into the green flames.

The Headmaster was not seen for the next forty-eight hours, unless one of the staff specifically went to see him. At the end of that time, he sent a message to each staff member saying that he would be sitting in on one class a week, under a disillusionment spell so as not to distract the students.

By the end of the week, he was feeling quite ill. He knew that Severus Snape was a harsh taskmaster, but he hadn't comprehended that the man insulted and humiliated his students. Cuthbert Binns paid no attention to his students whatsoever, even when they transfigured their books into pillows and slept through his entire class. Hagrid, although he meant well, introduced magical creatures much too powerful for the age and knowledge of the students involved. And Sybill Trelawney deliberately spouted death and doom to her students every class. When had he stopped putting the children first?

Albus Dumbledore to Focus on Hogwarts

by Rita Skeeter

In a surprise move today, Albus Dumbledore resigned from his position as the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot and as the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards.

"As my dear friend Amelia Bones recently pointed out to me, I have been spread too thin for too long. My focus should be on the children who are our future and I am resigning from the other positions to focus on being the best Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry that I can be. I'm going to be working closely with the staff over the next year to bring up our standards and continue to ensure that Hogwarts is one of the premier schools in the world.

Towards that end, I will personally begin teaching the OWL and NEWT level classes in the History of Magic while we search for a replacement for our own Cuthbert Binns."

The vote for the new Chief Witch or Chief Warlock should come at the next meeting of the full Wizengamot. Augusta Longbottom and Griselda Marchbanks lead the field of potential candidates for Chief Witches, while Tiberius Ogden is a favorite for Chief Warlock.

"Albus Dumbledore has long been a Leader of the Light," said Madame Longbottom, "and I respect his desire to focus his attention on our greatest resource for the future, our children."

"Good man," said Tiberius Ogden. "Not that I've always agreed with him, of course. We've had some long and heated discussions over the years, but his heart was usually in the right place."

"I've always thought the man was trying to do too many things at the same time, so that he couldn't give enough time or attention to any of them," said Wizengamot member Lucius Malfoy. "Hopefully, we will now elect someone capable of devoting his or her full attention to the Wizengamot."

"I look forward to seeing the changes that will be coming at Hogwarts," said Madame Griselda Marchbanks. "I have great grandchildren there and will be interested in hearing thier comments over the next year or two."

See page 4 for details of the Life and Times of Albus Dumbledore

Chapter 11 – Prophecy, Poison and Perturbation

Albus watched as the staff all filed into the staff room and filled their cups with either tea or coffee before the staff meeting. Minerva liked a strong unsweetened Oolong tea, while Severus filled his mug with a strong black coffee and then sat in his seat frowning at the other staff members. Cuthbert of course, never drank while Filius enjoyed tea with a splash of milk and one sugar. Hagrid's specially-sized mug of tea was heavily sugared as his system needed a lot of calories.

The elderly wizard watched Sybil and was pleased to see her looking distracted, but not showing signs of having sampled the sherry. He certainly hoped that was only a rumor. As he watched Irma Pince use multiple spoonfuls of sugar, he decided the old adage of "you are what you eat" didn't always apply. Poppy Pomfrey was one of the few people that chose ice water, believing it was important to "hydrate the tissues". Argus Filch simply stomped into the room and leaned against the wall, disdaining joining the other staff at the table. He waited for Rolanda Hooch, Pomona Sprout, Bathsheba Babbling, Septima Vector and Aurora Sinestra to fill their mugs and sit down.

He smiled over his glasses at the staff and began, "Today is an important day. We're going to be talking about some significant changes coming up that will affect everyone." He noticed the raised eyebrows or in the case of Severus, the narrowed eyes, but continued before they began to speak. "It was brought to my attention that I haven't been putting the students first, and that I allowed other duties and responsibilities to take away from my focus. However, the children are our hope for the future, and it's important that all of us put them first."

"Firstly, I have been very lax in some of my duties. I have failed to ensure that every staff member is applying the rules uniformly across all Houses and all students. If you have been favoring one House or persecuting one House that stops today. Whatever your reasons were in the past, it ends once you leave this meeting. To help ensure that all points and detentions are being fairly applied, Minerva and I will be reviewing every point addition or subtraction across all staff members, as well as the cause of a detention, what the student will be asked to do in the detention and the duration."

He allowed the roar of voices that opposed his actions several seconds to vent, and then slammed his hand down on the table, startling everyone present. "In addition, each Head of House will receive a weekly report by student showing the points earned or lost and detentions assigned. Beyond that, there will be a weekly review at our staff meetings of the number of points taken and detentions assigned by staff member by House, as well as the total hours of detentions served." He looked around the room with a severe expression. "If needed, we will use pensieve memories to prove or disprove the points or detentions." He noticed the rage building on Severus' face, but raised an eyebrow at the younger man who immediately smoothed his features into bland neutrality.

"Secondly, all staff members will treat their students with the same respect that they expect to receive. That means each of you will use their title of Miss or Mister, not just their surnames unless you want to be called by your surname only. I expect all of you to behave with decorum and professionally, without insulting or deliberately humiliating your students."

He looked at each teacher briefly before continuing, "This doesn't mean that you can't discipline your students. I understand that you have to maintain decorum in your classrooms. What it means is that we will be working to make sure that all teachers give or take points for the same reasons and that detentions are uniformly applied. I will work with each staff member individually to ensure that your actions are in line with the rest of the staff. If one professor takes five points for an offense and another takes twenty, we'll need to agree on what the appropriate response should be and apply it going forward."

"Thirdly, I've been blatantly unfair to Minerva and hope she will forgive an old man for not realizing it. No one person should be expected to fill three roles, yet I expected her to fill the roles of Transfiguration teacher, Head of House and Deputy Headmaster. I am leaving it to Minerva to choose which two roles she wants to continue and will then fill the third."

"Actually Headmaster, I have decided," the stern woman announced. He nodded to her and picked up his cup to sip the tea as Minerva looked around the staff table. "I would like to continue as the Head of Gryffindor and as the Transfiguration teacher for all Years. I wanted to ask the other Heads of Houses if they would be willing to split the duties of Deputy Headmaster between the four of us. That

would share the work across all of us, and allow for any of us to move into the position more permanently as needed."

Albus watched the faces. Filius and Pomona looked mildly interested while Severus had rolled his eyes before reapplying his unemotional mask. "Please meet to discuss how it would work and who would do what and let me know next week. I'm certainly willing to consider it as long as you are all in agreement." He looked over his glasses at everyone and smiled kindly. "Cuthbert, would you remain for a few minutes after everyone leaves?"

The ancient looking figure looked up with mild surprise. He floated through the table towards the Headmaster as the other staff members retired for the evening. "You wanted me Headmaster?" his dry and reedy voice wheezed.

"Yes Cuthbert, thank you for staying. Tell me, how long have you been teaching History of Magic?"

The semi-transparent figure looked confused. "I...I started teaching in 1807."

Albus smiled gently at the ghost. "Cuthbert, do you know what year it is now?"

The bewildered professor's spirit wheezed, "Year? Now?"

"Yes now, Cuthbert. Do you know that we're nearing the end of the twentieth century?"

"The...twentieth century?" the spirit questioned.

"Yes Cuthbert. I was wondering about whether it might be appropriate for you to retire after the end of this school year. You've been a dedicated teacher for nearly 190 years. However, you passed away almost one hundred years ago, and what there have been significant events of historical significance that you don't teach, because they occurred after your death."

"Events? I've missed historical events? What events?"

"Wars with Dark Lords that killed thousands of witches and warlocks for one."

The information seemed to slowly penetrate the spirit's consciousness and he looked at the Headmaster with something akin to remorse. "I'm not teaching the students about wars that happened?" A thought seemed to occur to him and he added, "Is that why you started teaching my N.E.W.T. students, Headmaster?"

"Yes, Cuthbert. Because of that, I wanted to suggest that it might be time to retire after this year. You're always welcome to stay in the castle though. It's certainly been your home for many years."

"Retire...yes, maybe it's time to retire." He turned and drifted through the wall, deep in thought.

"I hope he waits until after the end of the school year," thought the Headmaster. "It would be difficult for me to take all of his classes and still function as Headmaster."

"So you're finally going to retire that droning bore," asked a sarcastic voice.

Albus Dumbledore spun, moved to the side and shot a stunning spell with such speed and intensity that it belied his advanced age.

"Hold on Albus," said the voice from the shadows with evident amusement. "There's no need to stun me."

Albus rolled his eyes as he recognized the voice. "Algernon? Is that you? You should know better than to surprise me." He ignored the fact that the man had bypassed the wards and had been in the room without his knowledge. His old friend was one of those wizards who had discovered that magic was inherent to the very fabric of existence and manifested itself in ways that were difficult to explain, and who spent a lifetime learning more about magic than the average wizard.

Algernon Croaker stepped into the light and bowed slightly, his dark cloak bore a barely noticeable clasp with the insignia of the Unspeakables. He pushed the hood off his head, revealing an older man with iron gray hair and shrewd eyes. He silently cast several security spells and endured the Headmaster's amused reaction.

"I'm glad to see you're replacing Binns. My granddaughter will be coming to Hogwarts soon, and I was afraid that I was going to have to teach her History."

Albus smiled at the Unspeakable. "Help yourself to tea or coffee," he suggested as he warmed his own cup. "What brings you to me today?"

"It's about our favorite Dark Lord," the other man said blandly. "I want you to tell me everything you know about him."

The Headmaster sipped his tea and considered the request. He had always held information close, so as not to alert enemies or endanger friends. But recently it had been shown that he had made many mistakes in his judgments. "What will you do with the information," he asked evenly.

"There is a joint British and American task force working on the...problem. The Unspeakables were asked to participate."

Albus was surprised that Cornelius hadn't notified him of a joint task force, but the...what was his title...Senator had mentioned offering his help when they visited Harry Potter at his American school. He sighed heavily at the thought of the boy. He had done everything to help as many as possible, but had overlooked or somehow accepted the impact to the boy as an "acceptable" cost.

Albus considered carefully and then made a swift decision. "Lord Voldemort was born as Tom Marvolo Riddle to Merope Gaunt, a descendent of Salazar Slytherin and Tom Riddle, a wealthy muggle on whom Merope used a love potion. After she was pregnant, she discontinued the potion, and Riddle left her. She gave birth to Tom and died, leaving him to be raised in a Muggle orphanage." He ignored the raised eyebrows at the revelation that the Dark Lord who preached blood purity was a half-blood.

"He eventually received his Hogwarts letter and was sorted into Slytherin." The Headmaster sighed regretfully remembering the teen. "He was a good looking lad and quite popular among his peers, and exceedingly talented, which led to him becoming Head Boy in his Seventh Year. He achieved an Outstanding on every N.E.W.T. he took. Unfortunately, the pleasant boy we all saw was only a façade. In reality, he was a cruel, sadistic, manipulative and power hungry

young man filled with rage for every person who ever hurt or wronged him."

"How did he attain the title of Lord Voldemort," asked the Unspeakable.

With a faint smile, Albus took his wand and repeated what the memory of Tom Riddle had shown Harry in the Chamber of Secrets, writing Tom Marvolo Riddle and then rearranging the letters to become "I am Lord Voldemort".

At the other man's nod of understanding, Albus continued, "He began using the Dark Arts at school, but we somehow missed it. He actually created a horcrux with a journal that contained a memory of his 16-year old self." Only the other man's slight widening of the eyes revealed that he understood what a horcrux was. "When an eleven year old girl began writing in the journal, he began siphoning her life and magic to become corporeal again. Young Harry Potter fought the memory and destroyed the horcrux with basilisk venom two years ago."

"I suspected what the journal was and knowing that he traveled extensively in his youth seeking more knowledge in the Dark Arts, I became afraid that he had created even more of them. He was obsessed with Hogwarts and the Founders, and I believe he used an artifact from each of the Founders to create other horcruxes." He looked at the cloaked figure. "You understand why I kept the knowledge confidential, I assume?"

"We certainly don't need any death eaters or aspiring dark lords experimenting with their own horcrux" said the other man immediately.

Albus nodded, pleased that the other man agreed with him. "Because young Harry was a parselmouth, yet the Potters had no link to the Slytherin family, I was concerned that when he survived the killing cursed, Riddle had somehow embedded another horcrux in the boy. However, his new school brought in some curse-breakers who identified his curse scar as containing a soul leech, which they transferred out of him."

"And your interest in Mr. Potter?" asked the Unspeakable.

Albus removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes tiredly and with deep remorse. "Sybil Trelawney made a prophecy while I was interviewing her for a staff position. She remembered nothing about it afterwards and as it was recording at the Hall of Mysteries, I had to believe it was true. The prophecy stated 'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives ... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies ...' When the prophecy was made, both the Potters and the Longbottoms were expecting a child near the end of July. A death eater overheard the first part of the prophecy, but not the later half. Voldemort targeted the Potters first, possibly because their child would be half-blood. Harry was born July 31st and his parents had both defied and fought Voldemort multiple times. When the killing curse rebounded, he was 'marked', so I believed him to be the child of prophecy."

"Either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives" repeated Croaker. "That could refer to the very night the curse rebounded to the Dark Lord. He was definitely vanquished by the babe until he was reborn."

Albus rubbed his eyes again. "That's what Harry's friends and family believes", he admitted. "I knew Voldemort wasn't completely gone because the Dark Mark on his followers only lightened, it didn't disappear. I believed that Harry still had a part to play."

"Well, perhaps he does, but let's see what the joint task force can do before we involve a teenager. Do you have ideas about what the Founder items are that Riddle used?"

"I have been giving it considerable thought," replied the elderly wizard, going on to explain what he knew of relics left by the Founders and whether they would have appealed to Riddle, and if he had any idea as to their whereabouts.

The two men talked until late in the night while others slept unaware.

Screams of agony echoed throughout the chamber as the Death Eater's body contorted under the Cruciatus curse. As the minutes progressed, the other Death Eaters present had to struggle to

remain rigid and appear unmoved by the hoarse and weakening shrieks of anguish.

Finally Voldemort lifted the curse and only the sound of the man struggle for breath could be heard, as his body still trembled from the aftermath of the curse. Slowly, the man pulled himself up to his knees, suffering evident in every muscle movement.

"Th..thank you..for your..mercy..My Lord," the man panted. "I will not..fail you..again."

"Another failure is not an option, Nott," the cool voice of the Dark Lord responded. "You were to remove Potter from that school using subtlety and cunning. You chose to Imperius his roommate; an adequate action – if it had worked. It did not, and it alerted Potter and his protectors to the plan. Your ineptitude has made our next effort more difficult."

Nott leaned forward, laying his forehead on the ground, expecting another Crucio, but it didn't come as Voldemort glared around the room at his Inner Circle. Each of his followers sought to show their loyalty through their eyes and submissive posture, and tried not to cringe with his next icy comments. "A Lord expects to be able to delegate some tasks to his most trusted followers. However, recent actions seem to imply that you cannot be depended upon and that I must perform every minor action myself. Tell me," he asked in a silky tone, "is that true?"

The Death Eaters flinched. Answering in the positive would bring instant death while answering in the negative would draw his personal attention, not always something to be desired. Lucius Malfoy responded first. "We live to serve you My Lord and we are honored to be given any task."

The red eyes fixed him with a fierce stare. "Then perhaps you will succeed where Nott failed, Lucius."

The blonde bowed deeply and awaited instructions.

"You will go to where Harry Potter is. You will do everything you can to disrupt or remove his supporters, including his godfather, teachers and friends. You will find a way to portkey him to my

dungeons." His thin lips gave a parody of a smile. "And you will not fail me, will you Lucius?"

"No my Lord," the blonde replied. "I will deliver him to your hands or die trying."

"Very good, Lucius. For I would ensure that your death took weeks if you failed."

Severus Snape strode through the halls with a thunderous expression on his face, making the few students still out these last few minutes before curfew shrink away from him as he billowed past them. He stopped at the gargoyle and spat out "Fizzing Whizbee" and glared at the stone figure as it moved out of the way as if it was responsible for such a reprehensible password. He marched up the stairs and raised his hand to knock only to hear "Come in Severus" from inside. He growled at the Headmaster's supposed omniscience and opened the door.

The Headmaster smiled as he walked in and waved him to a chair, quickly summoning tea. "Are you well, dear boy? Do you need any potions or to see Poppy?"

Severus sat gracefully in the chair and accepted a cup of tea. "No thank you, Headmaster. I was fortunate to escape the meeting without damage tonight."

The elderly wizard's blue eyes sparkled with relief. "Excellent, my dear boy. Tell me, what was Tom up to tonight?"

"He nearly drove Nott insane with the Cruciatus for failing to kidnap Potter and gave the assignment to Lucius Malfoy, along with the instructions to remove Potter's support, including teachers and school friends. His obsession with the brat is reaching astronomical proportions."

Albus folded his fingers around his own teacup and sipped it as he considered. "Tom was at the peak of his power when he was defeated by a toddler. The blow to his ego must have been devastating. I wouldn't be surprised if he believed that the wizarding world is snickering at that defeat behind his back. Only killing Harry Potter himself will likely satisfy him." He looked back at the taciturn Potions Master, "There was nothing else, Severus?"

"Not tonight, Headmaster."

"Very well, I will pass the information on so that Mr. Potter's protectors are aware of the threat."

Severus finished his tea, placed the cup quietly on the tray, rose and inclined his head to the older wizard. "I will return to the dungeons, then. Good night, Headmaster."

Albus smiled gently at the younger wizard. "Good night and thank you, my dear boy." He ignored the rolled eyes the Potions Master couldn't control at the endearment and wondered what he could do from his end to help protect Harry Potter without being seen as an interfering meddler. He didn't want Amelia, Minerva or the Marauders after him again.

Sirius Black stormed into the Clinic at St. Croix with an expression that promised dire torture. He paused at the reception desk long enough to snap out "I'm Harry Potter's godfather. Where is he?"

The young woman tried not to flinch at his thunderous appearance and was proud that her voice was calm in the face of this angry man. "Yes Mr. Black, I called you as Harry's emergency contact. He's in examining room four, through those doors." The double doors were already swinging shut before she finished her sentence.

Sirius knocked once and then opened the door slightly without waiting for a response. Inside he found Harry lying on an examining table with Healer Masuto and Christine Sadler monitoring the young teen.

Harry smiled as he saw his godfather and tried to sit up, only to be gently pushed down by the Asian healer. "Sirius!" he said instead. Seeing the concern on the older man's face, he immediately added, "I'm OK. I either ingested or absorbed some type of poison, but it only made me dizzy and a little nauseous."

"Poison," Sirius said weakly looking at Masuto with alarm. "Will he be all right? What happened?"

Taguchi Masuto immediately soothed the distressed man as he cast completed another diagnostic spell. "Yes, I believe someone was

able to place a poison on the surface of something that Harry touched and the poison was absorbed through the skin. However, no one knows that Harry's encounter two years ago with a basilisk and phoenix tears made him highly resistant to poisons and venoms. Even without the bezoar we gave him, I think he would have recovered on his own."

"Poison," Sirius repeated as he gripped his godson's hand. "Has an investigation begun to see whether it was an accident or deliberate?"

Harry squeezed the hand hold his back and interjected, "I'm the only one that's come in so far." He left it unsaid that no other victims meant that it was a targeted attack.

"Security and Principal Graham have been notified," added Masuto. "I am certain they will ensure a thorough investigation takes place."

Sirius' grey eyes held the Healer's gaze with a frantic need for reassurance. "You're certain that Harry will be all right? There will be no side effects?"

"I would like him to stay overnight just to be certain," he began as Harry groaned at the restriction. "But so far Harry only has some lingering muscle pain. You're welcome to stay with him, Mr. Black." The teen cheered up considerably with that concession and looked hopefully at his godfather.

"Wild hippogriffs couldn't keep me away, Pup" he said as he slid his arm around the youth in a half-hug. Perhaps by the morning he would be willing to let his godson out of his sight, but at the moment, he needed to keep touching the teen to make sure he was safe. And in the morning – well, perhaps he would just escort the boy to classes. "Remus would be here too, but it was the full moon last night."

"It's OK, Sirius," Harry said quickly. "I know that even with the Wolfsbane potion he needs a day to recover."

Ms. Sadler excused herself with a warm smile for Harry when Healer Masuto came to show them to a semi-private room in the Infirmary that had two beds. Once Harry was safely ensconced under the covers, the Healer summoned two meals and left them alone.

Harry nibbled on his plate trying not to acknowledge that Sirius was watching him anxiously, as if gauging every bite and calorie he consumed. "Your dinner is getting cold Padfoot," he finally grinned and the older man ducked his head in embarrassment before starting on his own meal.

"Can't blame a godfather for wanting to make sure his godson is recovered," he mumbled around a bite of shepherd's pie. "I have a lot of years of pampering to catch up on."

The dark-haired youth hid a smile at the warm feeling the words gave him. He never thought he would have an adult that cared for him as Sirius did.

After dinner, Harry distracted Sirius by asking him where the Marauders came up with their ideas for pranks, and that kept the older man happily reminiscing until it was lights out. If he realized that his godson was comforting him rather than the other way around, he didn't mention it.

The following morning, Healer Masuto gave him one exam and then waved him away saying, "Go on then, Harry. You're just taking up a perfectly good bed here."

The teen gave him a cheeky grin, but made good his escape with Sirius on his heels. "Are you going to follow me all day, Sirius" asked Harry with a slight flush made of equal parts embarrassment and gratification.

"Let's at least get you back to your dorm room and changed," hedged his godfather. "We'll see after that."

They chatted about Harry's healing class which the boy was thoroughly enjoying on the way back to Blair House. "I really like Healing," the teen said enthusiastically, "but I can see where just studying that would be enough. But I still have Astronomy, Arithmancy, Battle Magics, Botany, Charms, Potions, and Transfiguration in addition to Magical Creatures, and Art Appreciation. There just aren't enough hours in a day!"

Sirius barked in laughter as they opened the door to Harry's dorm room. "You're just like Lily there, Pup. She had so much she wanted

to study and always complained about there being too little time for it all."

The older man paused a few steps into the room, realizing that Harry was looking across the room with growing concern on his young face. Elias Guerrero sat on his bed, his eyes blankly staring, as his hand mechanically stroked Xolotl down the back. He gave no acknowledgement to the other two as they entered.

"Ssspeaker, my Boy is ill or injured," hissed the upset fire lizard. "You mussst help him!"

"Elias?" asked Harry softly, "are you all right?" He moved slowly to the other boy and crouched down, lightly touching one arm. "Can you hear me?"

Elias slowly focused on the concerned green eyes and Sirius flinched at the haunted shock the brown eyes contained. It reminded him too much of what he used to see in the mirror after leaving Azkaban. "It's Miguel and Anarosa. Those... Mortífagos... ¿Cómo se dice...Death Eaters from Britain attacked them."

OoOoOoOo

Chapter 12 – How They Work in the Colonies

"It's Miquel and Anarosa. Those... Mortíagos... ¿Cómo se dice?...Death Eaters from Britain attacked them."

Harry's breath caught in his throat and he vaguely heard a roaring sound in his ears. "Not Anarosa", he thought desperately, "please Merlin, not Anarosa! She didn't do anything except help me!"

He heard Sirius' voice in the distance, a soothing counterpoint to the horrified silent screaming in his own mind. "Is there anyone coming for you, Elias?" At the boy's frozen nod the older man gently asked, "Can you tell us what happened?"

"My older brother Dante always looks out for me and keeps me informed on what's happening in the family. His letter said that those cobardes attacked Miguel and Anarosa at home as they sat outside enjoying a drink before dinner. The neighbors saw the attack, but it happened too quickly for them to do anything. I don't know how bad it is yet. All I know is that my father is coming to take me home."

The roaring was louder in Harry's ears and he realized his vision had started to blacken a bit. He sat down heavily and took a deep breath. "Not Anarosa!" he begged silently. He glanced up to realize that Sirius was now seated beside the grieving boy and gently rubbing his back. "Would you like Harry to pack a bag for you, Elias?"

Elias gazed at the older man for a few moments as if trying to focus on and translate his words and then shook his head. "I have everything I need at home. I just need to bring Xolotl's cage with me. But thank you," he added mechanically.

Sirius continued to rub the distraught boy's back as he looked at Harry crouched at his roommate's feet. His godson looked in shock as guilt traced itself over his features.

A knock sounded and the door immediately opened to show a 40-something black-haired man, his face tight with grief. Behind the man, Harry could see Christine Sadler. "Papa!" yelled Elias and was across the room and enveloped in a fierce hug in seconds. Within seconds, the boy had begun heaving deep sobs into his father's chest who simply murmured to him and held him tightly.

Harry and Sirius moved to the other side of the room, and the older man placed a gentle arm around his godson's trembling shoulders. He wanted to murmur "It will be all right, Harry", but how could he do that when he didn't know if the attorney Harry respected and cherished was alive or dead? So he held him close and attempted to let his presence comfort the boy.

Eventually Elias' sobs slowed and ended with small hiccups. The elder Guerrero finally looked at the other two in the room. "I have no news," he said sadly. "Anarosa was hit with a Diffindo to her neck while Miguel was cursed with an Entrail Exploding hex. They were taken to Eastlake Hospital just before I came to get Elias."

Harry found his voice and rasped "I'm so sorry, Mr. Guerrero!"

Dark brown eyes examined the guilt-stricken teen and a slight widening showed that he realized who the boy was. The older man's voice was reserved as he nodded and said "Thank you. It is a difficult time for the family."

He withdrew his wand and flicked it over the glass cage holding Xolotl to levitate it. "Come, Elias. Let's go home." In a few moments, they were gone.

Sirius looked at the dark-haired Healing instructor who was still in the room. "I'll be taking Harry home, Ms. Sadler," he said quietly. "Would you ask his teachers for any assignments?"

"Of course Mr. Black," she said gently. "I'll take care of it." She looked at Harry with concerned eyes and glanced at Sirius, who nodded. She slipped out the door and closed it quietly.

"Harry," he began.

"It's my fault," the teen responded in a harsh whisper. "It's all my fault. They wouldn't have been attacked if it weren't for me."

Sirius moved quickly and embraced his godson. "No Harry, you didn't order the attack, did you? You didn't hold the wands and you didn't cast the curses. The blame rests purely on Voldemort and his cowardly sycophants."

"But if I hadn't hired Anarosa, she would never have been targeted!"

Sirius put his hands on the teen's cheeks and tipped his head to meet his eyes. "Prongslet, listen to me. Anarosa is a very smart woman and a responsible adult. She evaluated your situation before she ever took you on as a client. When Voldemort rose again, she knew you were a target and she chose to keep you as a client."

The emerald eyes shimmered with tears that overflowed and ran down his cheeks over Sirius's fingers. "It's not fair! She's so good and it's just not fair!" He buried his head in his godfather's shoulder and let the grief and guilt tear out of his chest as racking sobs.

Sirius held him close and rocked him gently. "No, it's not fair. No one deserves to be targeted by that lunatic." As he comforted his godson, his thoughts turned to James and Lily. "What do I do now, Prongs?" he wondered. "How do I help your son through this?"

It was another hour before the two returned home.

A curt "Enter!" answered Kinglsey Shacklebolt's sharp rap on Amelia Bones office door, and he and Senior Auror Lawrence Palmer entered briskly. Shacklebolt was a middle-aged tall black wizard, who kept his head clean-shaven and wore a gold earring while Palmer was in his early thirties, average height, sandy blonde hair and flinty brown eyes. She waved them to the two seats in front of her desk and then inspected them both as if judging and validating their worth. Both men kept from squirming under the intense scrutiny, used to their Head's examinations.

"I want you two to take all files you have on Voldemort and his Death Eaters and then pack for a long-term overseas assignment. I'm delegating you to work with..." she looked down at a file on her desk, "...Special Agent James Sheppard of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the United States. Harry Potter has been targeted three times now that we know of. First when someone used the Imperius curse on his roommate, then when he was poisoned by an unknown assailant. The most recent assault however was against his attorney and her husband when they were attacked at their home by four assailants dressed as Death Eaters."

Shacklebolt kept his emotions from showing on his face only through years of training. They hadn't stopped the Dark Lord within their own

borders and now his violence had spread to other countries. It was a slur against the DMLE and an embarrassment to all Aurors. To his chagrin, the Order of the Phoenix had done little but react either. He realized his boss was speaking again and paid strict attention.

"The American couple attacked were Anarosa and Miguel Diaz. Both are attorneys, but the woman is Mr. Potter's personal solicitor. She was hit with a Diffindo to the throat and barely survived. It is unknown whether she'll ever be able to speak again. Her husband was hit with an Exploding Entrail curse, but fortunately the healers arrived in time to save him."

Palmer frowned as he tried to recall details and then asked, "What can you tell us about the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Madame Bones?"

The gray-haired woman picked up a pamphlet from the folder in front of her. "You can read through this, but basically the FBI is the principal investigative arm of both the magical and non-magical branches of the U.S. Department of Justice. Their mission is to protect and defend the United States against terrorist and foreign intelligence threats and to enforce the criminal laws of their country. With the recent attack on their citizens, their interest in Voldemort has intensified considerably."

She leaned forward and pinned both men with a fierce glare. "Details on your travel arrangements and accommodations are in the file. You will offer all possible support to this agency as well as gather any new information that you can. You represent the DMLE and I expect you to do so in a professional and efficient manner. I expect an update every 48 hours. Are we clear?"

Both men stood, their backs rigid and their eyes looking over her head. "Clear ma'am".

She nodded crisply. "Dismissed then. I'll expect your first report in 48 hours."

Harry glanced hesitantly over his shoulder at Sirius, who just nodded encouragement to him. Gathering his courage, he knocked lightly on the door. After a few muffled footsteps, the door opened to show Miguel Diaz, dressed in non-standard pajamas covered by a black silk robe and wearing soft leather slippers. His brown eyes widened

slightly in surprise at the young teen and older man, but when he took in the fearful and guilt-ridden face before him, his face warmed and he offered the two a smile.

"Cara mia, we have guests," he called over his shoulder. "Come in, gentleman", he continued.

"How...how are you feeling Mr. Diaz? Is your stomach all right now?" In a slightly softer voice Harry added, "Are..are you sure you want me to come in?"

"I am doing very well, thank you Harry. The healers cleared me to go home tomorrow." He grinned at a peremptory banging was heard coming from behind a fabric privacy screen that blocked the beds from the hallway. "And based on that thumping, I believe Anarosa is rather insistent that you come in." Another bang could be heard as if in agreement.

Miguel waved the two visitors into the room, and Harry hesitantly approached the privacy screen and the bed it hid. Anarosa sat in the bed, propped up with several pillows. The teen's eyes were drawn to the white gauze that covered her throat and he blinked quickly as tears filled his eyes. A sharp rap brought his attention to a pad of paper that Anarosa had used to hit the bed table beside her. She offered the teen a warm smile and opened her arms to him. With a sob, he ran into her arms and wrapped his own around her, being careful to only touch her gently.

"I'm so sorry," he sobbed, "it's all my fault. If you hadn't taken me as a client, this would never have happened. Voldemort only knows about you because of me. I'm so sorry you were hurt!"

The woman looked up at Sirius with concerned eyes even as she stroked the teens back softly. Sirius smiled sadly at her, but said matter-of-factly, "Harry understands intellectually that Voldemort and his terrorist band are responsible for their own actions, but emotionally, seeing someone he cares about hurt is something else."

"S'my fault," Harry mumbled as he shut his eyes tightly and tried to stop the tears. Merlin, Anarosa would think he was five years old with his behavior! When he thought he had control of his emotions, he pulled back a little to look into his attorney's face, and was

surprised at the affection he saw. She stroked his cheek gently for a moment and then he yelped when the same hand delivered a smack to the back of his head.

She picked up the pad of paper and a pen and turned to a new sheet of paper. With quick strokes she wrote for a minute and then turned the pad to face him. "Silly boy! Are you questioning my intelligence? Do you think I fail to think situations through before making decisions?"

Harry looked up from the pad in shock. "What? No! But.."

She scribbled again. "But nothing. If you agree that I think my decisions through, then you agree that I understood the risks and accepted them – which I did."

Harry tried again to express his culpability in a way she would understand. "But you wouldn't be here with your throat sliced and having to write instead of talk if it weren't for me!"

Anarosa rolled her eyes and again wrote on the pad with sharp and almost angry strokes. "Ah, so you think you're my only client? Or the only client with enemies? Nonsense! While you're a special young man, your circumstances are not that unusual. Now stop the self-reproach and tell me if the FBI approached you yet. I had an agent come see me this morning."

"The FBI? No, we haven't heard from them." He looked over his shoulder at Sirius, who shook his head in confirmation.

Anarosa looked at Miguel and shook her hand to indicate she was tired of writing. Her husband moved to the other side of the bed and caressed her cheek for a moment before looking at their visitors. "Special Agents James Sheppard and Lora Peterson came to see us this morning. Ever since the World Trade Center bombing last year, the FBI has been on heightened alert towards acts of terrorism, whether non-magical or magical. The fact that a British terrorist is willing to cross international borders and attack on U.S. soil put Voldemort near the top of their Most Wanted list; at least on the Magical front."

He paused as Anarosa scribbled two words on her pad and smiled. "She said to tell you this is a 'good thing'. By that, she means the

FBI has considerable resources to bring to the effort. The two Special Agents we spoke with said that two Aurors are coming over from the British Ministry of Magic to assist with the investigation and help with plans to thwart any future attacks. When they do approach you, please share anything you can with them so that they can prepare a profile and make appropriate plans."

Sirius spoke up out of curiosity, "A profile?"

Miguel nodded as he explained, "Agents collect the general facts about a perpetrator and are able to make educated guesses about what the next target could be, when it will occur, how it will take place, et cetera. We already know who the mastermind is, so we need to make proactive plans to prevent any of his schemes from being successful. The FBI has a history of quietly foiling some major attempts."

Anarosa wrote again and turned the pad towards Harry. "In or out of school?"

"I'm at home right now. I didn't want to risk anyone else getting hurt and Sirius says the Black wards are among the best."

The other adults looked at Sirius with a question. "Black Family wards are blood-based. They've never been breached. I've pretty much shut down the property to everyone but Harry, Remus and me. Anyone else would be bounced off the wards and anyone foolish enough to subsequently attempt to penetrate them receives progressively violent reactions."

Harry looked a bit embarrassed as he added, "Sirius overreacts a bit. He's making me carry two emergency portkeys at all times." He was surprised to see the other adults nod approvingly.

"We're still having fun though," Sirius objected. "Didn't I teach you how to turn water into rum? Your father and I didn't learn that until our Sixth Year at Hogwarts!" He chuckled at Anarosa's rolling eyes and Miguel covering his eyes as he muttered, "I didn't hear that."

The two visitors stayed several more minutes, but Sirius was relieved to see that the overwhelming guilt his godson had been bearing had lessened considerably by the time they took their leave.

Kingsley Shacklebolt finished his first report to DMLE Head Amelia Bones after arriving in the United States. Special Agent James Sheppard turned out to be a lean man with salt-and-pepper hair and tired eyes. Very straightforward, he had the tendency to be more blunt than tactful. However as his file revealed, he had a long string of successfully closed cases.

Lora Peterson had been assigned as his partner only a year ago, but the two had begun developing a good working relationship. In her late thirties, she had close-cropped brown hair that began to curl in the humid weather, making her appear much younger. She had a background in biostatistics and psychology that left Shacklebolt wondering about U.S. occupations and methods.

Special Agent Peterson was able to share the latest about the investigation into Harry Potter's poisoning. She opened one of the files she carried and gave them copies of a multi-page report. "To summarize this, our investigators validated that he had no letters with poisons, his books were clean as were his other school supplies. His dorm room had nothing unexpected and nothing that could be combined with other components to form the poison he had. We also checked the seats in his classrooms and in the cafeteria, but they were clean as well. The heating and cooling systems were thoroughly inspected, but nothing suspicious was found. Our current theory is that someone bumped into him and transferred it directly to his skin that way, but we have no firm suspects."

Shacklebolt opened his own files and retrieved pictures of Lucius Malfoy which he gave to his counterparts. "We learned that this man, Lucius Malfoy, was given the assignment to destroy Harry Potter's supporters and kidnap the boy if at all possible."

"Riddle's obsession with Mr. Potter is interesting" said Sheppard. "It implies that his ego is more important than his goals. Obviously, a 15-month old child didn't deliberately defeat him, so it was either a protection given by his parents, something inherent in the boy's magic, or something Riddle himself did wrong. Regardless, he is unable to move forward because his ego can't seem to resolve having been defeated by Mr. Potter." He looked back at the Aurors and asked, "What can you tell us about why he didn't die in 1981?"

The revelation about the horcruxes caused duplicate expressions of revulsion on the FBI agent's faces, which Shacklebolt found vaguely

relieving. At the end of their first four hour discussion, Special Agent Sheppard had leaned back in his chair as he looked out in the distance with hooded eyes. "So basically we're dealing with an obsessive-compulsive with Daddy abandonment issues who had to create a new identity to find his self-worth and who is terrified of death. The horcruxes may actually be an advantage for us," he continued as he thought out loud, ignoring the surprise on the Aurors faces. "After splitting his soul so many times, Riddle is likely incapable of thinking logically, meaning that his judgment will be compromised. We'll be able to use that against him."

Both Aurors noticed that the American agents tended to call You-Know-Who by his birth surname of Riddle. That was certainly easier than saying the "V" word and they thought it might be useful to adopt the practice.

Special Agent Peterson leaned forward to say, "I assume the Aurors have a Special Task Force assigned to find and destroy the horcruxes? What is the status of that effort?"

Palmer and Shacklebolt exchanged quick glances. The Ministry was trying to keep the existence of such loathsome creations secret, and Palmer had only been informed of them at Shacklebolt's insistence. He tugged on his earring in embarrassment as he admitted, "Only two people are assigned to searching for them. The knowledge that something like that can be created is not something the Ministry wants published, so it is a 'need to know' basis." He didn't add that the two were Order of the Phoenix members and not Ministry Aurors.

He couldn't help but see the fleeting look the two Special Agents shot one another and understood. He would prefer to have a team of six or more dedicated to finding and destroying the vile things. The female agent finally said "I suppose since it took over a dozen years for him to be 'reborn', your DMLE's approach is to destroy him now regardless and clean up the horcruxes afterwards?"

The dark-skinned Auror ignored the slight twitch from Palmer. How could they admit that as a department they had become reactive rather than proactive towards He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named or that he was nearly impossible to defeat?

As the seconds dragged on, Sheppard changed the subject to the Aurors relief. "How deeply have you been able to infiltrate his organization?"

"We have one agent in his so-called Inner Circle, but He doesn't share every detail with every Inner Circle member, so our visibility is somewhat limited." Shacklebolt didn't mention that their agent was not part of the DMLE. "That's how we knew who had the assignment against Harry Potter here in the States."

Sheppard picked up the pictures of Lucius Malfoy. "We'll circulate these among our agents and confirm whether he entered the country legally or illegally. With any luck, he bypassed Customs and we'll be able to hold him for that."

He considered the information about their agent. "Perhaps our R & D will have something we can pass to your infiltrator to incapacitate Riddle. We might have something, whether magical or not, for which he and his minions don't have a counter."

Palmer asked cautiously, "Are and Dee?"

Again, the two Americans exchanged glances again before Sheppard said easily, "Our Research and Development department. They are constantly creating new products or spells for agent use. Perhaps we can schedule a visit in the next few days."

As Shacklebolt completed his report, he couldn't help but suggest that a review of FBI departments and procedures could potentially offer assistance in helping the DMLE operate more efficiently and meet their Ministry objectives. He poured himself a drink from the ensuite bar after spending ten minutes trying to phrase that single sentence and shook his head. This was definitely an eye-opening trip.

STATUS REPORT #2

TO: Madame Amelia Bones, Department Head, Magical Law Enforcement

FROM: Senior Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt

Interview with Harry Potter with Special Agents Sheppard and Peterson

Also attending were Sirius Black and Remus Lupin. Mr. Potter is currently residing at a Black property in the town of Stillwater, State of Minnesota, U.S.A. He is being home-schooled for the immediate future. The property is warded by Black Family blood wards. Mr. Black is considering the Fidelius Charm on the property.

The fourteen year old witness described his numerous encounters with Tom Riddle and shared pensieve memories. These are being transcribed per FBI policy. A copy will be sent when complete.

Encounter #1 was during his first year. Discussed the pain he had in his curse scar when around Quirinius Quirrel. Reviewed the attempted murder attempt during a Quidditch game when his broom was hexed (saved by the counter curse cast by Severus Snape). Analyzed the confrontation in the Forbidden Forest where Quirrel killed unicorns and drank their blood to keep Riddle's spirit alive as well as his own deteriorating body. Finally examined the confrontation where Riddle was revealed as possessing Quirrel, the impact of Potter touching Quirrel and Quirrel's death and Riddle's subsequent flight, again as an incorporeal spirit.

Encounter #2 was during his second year. Riddle created his first horcrux at sixteen and sealed an imprint of himself inside a journal. The journal possessed and began to drain the life of eleven-year old Ginevra Weasley. The girl was able to open the Chamber of Secrets and release a 20 meter basilisk. Because the victims didn't see the basilisk's eyes directly, they were petrified rather than killed.

Mr. Potter, Mr. Ron Weasley and Professor Gilderoy Lockhart found the entrance to the Chamber (a second floor girl's lavatory). Professor Lockhart attempted to obliviate the students, but a cracked wand caused the spell to backfire, obliterating the instructor instead. Mr. Potter was separated from the other two by a rockfall and ventured on alone. He found a nearly corporeal teenaged Tom Riddle and a nearly dead Ginevra Weasley. He was able to kill the basilisk when the phoenix Fawkes brought him the Sorting Hat which provided Gryffindor's sword. He plunged the sword through the snake's mouth into the brain, killing it, but was bitten. He used a broken fang to destroy the horcrux, which destroyed Riddle's imprint before it could complete draining the young Weasley's life. Fawkes cured the poison through tears and then helped the two escape the Chamber. It was later assumed that Lucius Malfoy had planted the

journal among other books Miss Wealsey's purchased for the year. See Potter's pensieve memories for additional details.

Reports regarding the other assaults on Mr. Potter after leaving Hogwarts, including an Imperius'd roommate and a poison attempt are attached as an addendum. Transcripts of the FBI interview with Miguel and Anarosa Diaz are also attached.

Review of the tour of the FBI's Research and Development Department - Spelled for Madame Amelia Bones eyes only!

The FBI has a large staff devoted to investigating and producing both spells and items that can be used by field agents. I estimate that we saw over one hundred and fifty staff members during our three-hour tour. The spells and items are categorized under the broad categories of "Crowd Control", "Interview Aids", and "Offensive and Defensive".

Crowd control included both Muggle and Magical gases and potions that can be delivered through air, water or food. One such gas was designed to affect the emotions of a rioting crowd, changing the participants from violent to disinterested. It should be noted that the FBI uses both Muggle and Magical means based on the situation.

Interview aids included various Veritaserum potions and substitutes. Some of these potions can be absorbed through the skin or lungs rather than ingested through the mouth. They continue to develop new methods due to concerns about perpetrators developing a resistance or a time-released antidote to existing techniques.

Offensive and Defensive tools were sub-categorized into group and individual requirements. Defensive tools included armor, battle robes, protection charms as well as everyday items that prevent Legilimens or compulsion charms. All of their agents have a variety of these protections, as well as multiple healing potions and items that cast a one-time healing or protection charm if the caster is either magically exhausted or non-magical. Multiple communication tools were also under development, including two-way, or group tools. One tool permitted Agents to have a receiver implanted under the skin in the ear to receive communication and a transmitter to be implanted in the agent's throat, making both invisible to the naked eye. We were told that they drew heavily on Muggle technology of radio waves,

telephones and something called satellite communication to create magical counterparts.

The Offensive aids were devastating in their number and ingenuity. We saw items, potions and spells that converted blood into other components, including crystallizing it, turning it to sand, or what one agent called the "base components" of water, iron and minerals. We saw multiple methods of stopping an opponent's heart and lungs as well as more neutral ways to incapacitate large crowds as if an area-wide sleep or confundus spell was cast.

An item they called Clingfire appears to be similar to Fiendfire, but its objective is to only burn the first object it touches, leaving anything else alone. This item's weakness was described as still being subject to a vacuum; in other words without air, the fire cannot be supported.

Speaking of suppressing a fire, they are working on a broad-range spell to push all air away from a location for up to ten seconds. They believe this would eliminate a fire, but would allow victims time to escape when the air returns. This is still in the developmental stages.

We saw one team working on a method to negate all magical effects in an area, whether it is a magical item or spell. The problem they were struggling with was that Magical beings as well as adult witches and wizards cannot live with their magic being fully suppressed. Of course, that could be a benefit if one knew Riddle had called all of his Death Eaters together and then this was released into that area.

Their Muggle tools used a broad range of methods that have never occurred to me. For example, they could use high pitched sound capable of causing pain and unconsciousness, similar to a Banshee's cry. We witnessed chemical compounds similar to potions could heal or destroy. They seemed to have a wide range of toxic chemicals at their disposal.

I will provide pensieve memories of the entire tour when possible.

Attested and Witnessed,
Kingley Shackbolt

Amelia Bones read through the report three times before leaning back in her chair and turning her eyes to the ceiling. Shacklebolt's report was disturbing, very disturbing on multiple levels. She ran her hand over her face and wondered whether she would be able to sleep that night at all.

Chapter 13 – Lucius Finds a Way

A night spent with her mind moving too quickly to permit her to sleep left Amelia Bones exhausted and discontented as she began her day at the British DMLE. Shacklebolt's report kept imprinting itself on her mind's eye throughout the previous night. If his information was accurate, American research and development was much better funded with many more items in their arsenal than what was produced by the DoM. "Are we that far behind," she wondered for the tenth time, "or are they that much more advanced?"

She tapped her fingers on Shacklebolt's report as she muttered, "They use and adapt Muggle tools and methods that we'll never get approved by pureblood overseers. But it gives them many more options and opportunities, not only for defense, but for offense as well." She turned a page in the report, although she had mostly memorized everything in it by now. "Their communications are more immediate and varied, since they don't rely on the Floo or owls. If we created adapted their telephone technology into hand-held orbs, we might get the pureblood traditionalists to accept the concept."

She frowned at the folder again and pinched her nose at the most concerning of the items the Americans were working on. "Full suppression of magic. If they ever used it offensively, we would have no defense. Magical weapons would fail, spells would fail and we would be totally helpless. Thank Merlin You-Know-Who doesn't have access to that information!"

As Amelia Bones was beginning her day, Special Agent James Sheppard sipped tiredly at his coffee as he wandered into the empty Operations room to look at the evidence board that listed the facts and assumptions about T.M. Riddle, the self-proclaimed Lord Voldemort. This wizard-terrorist had spread his activities across the magical and non-magical world and was in jeopardy of opening the wizarding world to non-magical attention.

"Damn the Brit Ministry of Magic," he muttered irritably. "Why do they have to live in another century and remain deliberately oblivious to the technological advances of the last century? Why couldn't they emulate their MI-5 counterparts? Now there's a group that stayed on the cutting edge of not only technology, but investigative practices."

An amused voice broke through his rambling thoughts, "Speaking to yourself is the first signs of a mental breakdown, you know." He glared good-naturedly at Lora Peterson as she leaned against a desk in the large room.

"It's when I hold both sides of the conversation that you should worry," he replied with a grudging smile.

"Gotcha." She looked at the evidence board with a practiced eye, ignoring the fact that both of them should have headed out hours ago. "I see we had warning that one Lucius Malfoy had been assigned to harass or kidnap the Potter kid. Pity they couldn't have passed that along before the attack on the Diaz's."

Sheppard shook his head in disgust. "Apparently they sent the info via owl to Shacklebolt, and he had already arrived in the U.S. I still can't believe they refuse to adapt any technology. How do they justify a five day trans-ocean trip when the message could be texted to a shielded cell phone in minutes?"

The brunette tipped her head at her partner. "I assume you deliberately gave Shacklebolt and Palmer the R & D tour to open their eyes a bit?"

The gray-haired man couldn't restrain a smirk. "Heh, I have to believe their report home made for interesting reading. Not only are the American 'cousins' a force to be reckoned with, we're downright scary in our own right. The sheer number and ingenuity that the R & D teams come up with is something else."

Lora's dimples showed when she responded, "I wonder what they would think if they realized most of the teams are made up of Sci-Fi and James Bond geeks who get a lot of their ideas from movie writers?"

Her partner chuckled around his coffee cup and then frowned at the bottom of the cup when he drained the contents. He placed the cup on a desk and stared at the evidence board again. "Have you heard any more on the Diaz couple?"

"The husband is fully recovered, but the wife is going to be lucky to be able to speak in anything but a raspy whisper going forward. She's going to have a long recovery, although it looks like she'll be

released from the hospital in a few days. I hope she didn't spend a lot of her time in the court room. Malfoy achieved his end if he wanted the Potter kid off-kilter."

Sheppard turned to another board that identified suspected Riddle supporters in the U.S. "Malfoy is a well-chosen lieutenant, if Riddle acknowledges him as such. Independently wealthy, well-educated, and entrenched in British politics through bribes, blackmail and intimidation. He's been raised to design and execute multi-faceted schemes. We still have nothing on his location. If he hasn't taken a penthouse suite at a magical hotel, then he might be staying with a wealthy or like-minded associate." He picked up the chalk and made a notation to be followed up in the morning.

Dear Harry,

Thank you for your letter. I'm doing pretty well, now that we know that both Miguel and Anarosa survived the attack. You won't let anyone know I broke down like a baby, right? I'm still a bit worried about Anarosa. The Healer said she may never be able to speak normally again. She seems pretty upbeat in spite of that. She says alive and quiet is better than dead and buried.

All of the family has been upgrading their property wards, especially to block out anyone with that ugly tattoo. Your godfather was able to help with that. Please thank him again for us.

I'm supposed to go back to school tomorrow. Are you really going to be home-schooled for a while? The wards around St. Croix are really good. You shouldn't have to worry about the Dork Lord coming after you there. Mom thinks you're probably feeling guilty, but you shouldn't. You're only in charge of your own actions and can't let the terrorists win. So you should come back, OK? Besides, how will I know when Xolotl wants a belly rub if you're not there to translate for him?

Hope to see you soon,

Elias

Sirius hid a smile at the silly grin on his godson's face as the teen finished the letter from Elias. "Good news, Pup?"

Harry pushed the letter over to him. "Elias is doing fine and doesn't blame me for what happened to Anarosa and Miguel. He thinks I should go back to St. Croix. I was sure he would never want to be around me again." The dark-haired boy felt as if a crushing weight had been lifted from him. "Oh, and thank you for helping them with the warding against the Dark Mark, Padfoot."

"My pleasure. The Black wards have always used complex filters. It was pretty easy to show them how to ward against a specific trait." He smiled again at his godson. "So what do you think? Are you ready to go back to school?"

Harry raised brilliant green eyes to his godfather. "...I'm not sure. What if the other students get targeted? If I'm not there, they won't be identified. Or what if the Dork Lord targets my teachers? Maybe I'm better off being home-schooled."

Sirius had to snicker every time Harry called the Dark Lord the 'Dork Lord'. "And what if a tornado knocks down the school? Harry, you can't be responsible for the Dork Lord's every action. Trust me to work with the school's security and the FBI to ensure the school is safe. Like your roommate said, if you stay away from school, then he wins."

The teen took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'll think about it. But if I decide not to go back, you'll support me?"

He slung his right arm around his godson's shoulders and ruffled his hair with the other hand. "Always, Pup. Always. We're a team."

Amber eyes followed Sirius and Harry with restrained deliberation as they prepared to visit Anarosa. The wolf in Remus was practically howling with the need to protect his pack members, especially the cub. The youngster had already been targeted multiple times and Moony would like nothing better than to secrete him away in a safely warded fortress until Voldemort was destroyed. Unfortunately for the wolf, the man's will was stronger, so he had to manage with simply being prepared to guard and defend his pack as needed.

"Moony," Harry called, "are you coming with us to visit Anarosa?"

"If I am not intruding, I would be pleased to see her," admitted the graying man with a smile. Being invited to join them was much better

than forcing himself upon them. At least he could legitimately help protect the cub now.

"She's supposed to go home from Eastlake Hospital in another few days, as soon as the throat specialist approves," said Sirius. He gave a half-shrug at the question in Remus' eyes at his slightly worried tone. "I'll feel a lot better when she's under the more secure home wards than the general hospital wards." He lowered his voice before adding, "I know I'm being over-protective, but Eastlake seems too open to something going wrong. But Harry needs to see Anarosa and constantly reconfirm that he's not responsible for the attack."

The two adults trailed behind the raven-haired teenager on the way to Anarosa's room, their eyes swiveling as they marked every person and their position in relation to Harry. Each had one hand on their wand, but were attempting to walk naturally and not worry the teen.

"Harry," Miguel's voice called. Their eyes jumped to the smiling man who was coming from the stairwell carrying a pack of Exploding Snap cards. "Good, now that you're here, you can play with Anarosa." He tossed the deck to Harry, who caught it with ease, even though his seeker skills were slightly rusty.

The wolf in Remus howled as an unexpected leer crossed Miguel's face, the expression transforming him into someone they didn't know. Everything seemed to move in slow motion even as Remus tried to leap towards Harry and knock the deck out of his hands. The FBI agent guarding Anarosa's room began to withdraw his wand as Sirius did the same. "Into my Master's hands" Miguel smirked and the boy disappeared from the hallway, a look of shock and disbelief on his young face.

"No!" howled Remus in anguish as he landed on the spot where the cub had been, the boy's scent still in the air. "Vivo ut servire" Miguel hissed and he too disappeared from the hospital hallway just as dual stunners landed where he had been standing.

Vivo ut servire = I live to serve

Chapter 14 – Veni, Vidi, Vici

Harry felt the hook behind his navel and tried to drop the deck of cards he had caught from Miguel, but it was too late. His entire body was twisted and pulled in an unnatural direction. He stumbled and dropped onto a cold stone floor and immediately regurgitated his lunch. As the heavens racked his body, he heard a sound behind him, but all he saw was a red light before the blackness overtook him.

An alarm in the Operations room alerted the FBI team that Harry Potter was no longer in the previously defined boundaries. Within seconds of the alarm, Special Agent Mendleson was on the emergency channel reporting the port key kidnapping from Eastlake Hospital.

"Subject Potter was proceeding to the Diaz room with his godfather and another adult male following. Miguel Diaz exited the stairwell and tossed the subject a pack of cards and then initiated the trigger phrase. It sounded like 'into my master's hands'. He then immediately triggered his own port key with a Latin phrase that sounded like 'I live to serve'. Hold, getting another report..."

Sheppard snapped "Is the tracking device on the Potter kid working? I want a satellite triangulation now!"

Mendleson's voice returned, "Miguel Diaz was found unconscious in the stair well. Looks like a polyjuiced double tossed the port key as I would have noticed a straight glamour. Diaz only remembers hearing a footstep before he was stunned from behind." There was loud shouting in the background, followed by Mendleson's voice reporting, "The godfather and friend are almost out of control here." His voice was turned away from the communicator as he snapped, "someone give those two calming draughts!" The voice was louder as he turned back and said, "Someone could have told me the second adult was a werewolf. Damn, he's strong and furious as hell."

Sheppard ignored the comment and snapped, "Mendleson, work with Eastlake security and find out how a port key worked through their wards. I want a report within twenty-four hours." He looked around the room and then demanded, "Where are Aurors Shackbolt and Palmer? Someone get them up here and briefed."

"Satellite tracking coming in," said one of the agents.

"Put it up on the large screen," ordered Sheppard as he turned to watch the results. A global map of Northern America appeared on the screen, and then a flashing light appeared outside of the U.S. boundaries. Sheppard cursed quietly as the map shifted to Great Britain, then England specifically. "Forward this to National Security and let them figure out how an unauthorized international port key made it through the national wards. The NSC is not going to be happy about this. Peterson, mobilize the Riddle SWAT teams. This is not a drill. Repeat, this is not a drill. I'll go get approval from the Director."

As Harry clawed his way through the blackness towards consciousness, the first thing he became aware of was the awful coldness surrounding him. It seeped into his entire body and he was shivering almost uncontrollably. The memory of being kidnapped in the hospital returned.

"Black Sanctuary" he muttered, using the trigger for his first emergency port key. Nothing happened, no hook behind his navel. "Crap," he thought, "this is not good." He tried again for the backup port key with a whispered "Marauders Rule", but again nothing happened. He slowly opened his eyes and realized quickly why he was so cold. He was naked, lying on a chilly stone floor. That explained why his emergency port keys didn't work. They stripped him and removed everything. "No wand either," he realized and felt his heart drop further.

"Either Miguel was under Imperius or it wasn't Miguel at all," he recognized. "Sirius and Remus must be going insane." He rubbed his arms briskly and then his legs, trying to get some warmth into them. "Of course, they had to leave me naked" he muttered out loud, trying to stave off the embarrassment and feelings of vulnerability. "Merlin forbid they leave me even briefs." He lifted his hand to the back of his neck and felt a small bump under the skin and tried to hide a smile. So they hadn't found everything. Thank heavens they had agreed to let the FBI inject a shielded electronic tracking device. Now all he had to do was stay alive until help arrived.

He continued rubbing his skin to stay warm as he looked around the room. There was no window and no door that he could see. There wasn't even a pallet on the floor to give a little relief from the damp

and chilly stone. That also meant that there was nothing he could use to attack someone coming in to the room. If they had at least left his clothes, he could have used the belt and even his shoes as weapons. "Oh bloody hell," he snarled. "Not even a chamber pot. I hope you burn in hell slowly, Riddle."

Sheppard came back from the meeting with the Director and gave a nod to the SWAT teams assembled. "Senator Anderson negotiated with British Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge to gain authorization for a joint US-British task force several months ago. We're going to be mobilizing and using that force faster than expected. Multiple attacks against American citizens within our borders will not be tolerated. We'll be working through Director Amelia Bones in the British Department of Law Enforcement in a coordinated rescue mission."

He nodded to the two British Aurors who had been waiting with the rest of the team. "If you haven't already met Aurors Shacklebolt and Palmer, meet them now. They are our liaisons to the DMLE and Director Bones." He frowned slightly and then added, "There is also a chance that we will be working with an independent group called the 'Order of the Phoenix'. They are not under the DMLE direction, but a civilian group that apparently operates alongside the DMLE." He saw and agreed with the pained looks that appeared on the agent's faces. Civilian groups rarely had the discipline or skill of trained professionals and seemed to have a problem with following orders.

Sheppard looked at the tall black Auror and hid a smirk. "Auror Shacklebolt, would you also be the liaison to that group?" At the Auror's nod of acceptance, he relaxed a little, relieved that maverick civilians wouldn't be his problem. "Thank you. All right everyone, get ready. I want everyone equipped with full field packs and they better be in double-checked and in peak condition. We'll be taking an international port key to London in ten minutes to meet up with our British counterparts. Mission briefing will occur there."

A hum of magic drew Harry's attention to the left wall and a cell door made of steel rods appeared. The pale blond hair and cold grey eyes identified Lucius Malfoy before the famous sneer did. "Well, well, well, Mr. Potter," the supercilious voice mocked, "not quite living up to your reputation, are you?"

Harry looked at the man with distaste and then turned away in an overt show of disinterest.

The cold eyes narrowed at being dismissed before another smirk appeared. "I do hope your accommodations are to your liking? The Dark Lord will have time for you soon, but is busy setting up tonight's ritual." He smiled cruelly and added, "You play an important part in the ritual, or at least your heart and blood do. Not that you will survive it, of course."

The man hadn't drawn his wand, so Harry assumed Voldemort had left orders that no one but He could harm the teen. He felt relatively safe baiting the man in that case, so rolled his eyes deliberately and made a shooing gesture with one hand. "Run along, Lucius and go debase yourself before your half-blood Master some more. A pity the Malfoys have fallen so far as to be useful only as slaves to psychotic pedophiles. Hmm, is that what you raised Draco to be? Your master's new boy toy?" He yawned deliberately and made a point of sitting down and getting comfortable against the cold stones before closing his eyes.

The harshly drawn breath let him know his insult had scored. "Enjoy your remaining hours, Potter," Malfoy sneered again. The door disappeared and Harry rolled his eyes for real at the older man's posturing. "Berk." What kind of adult felt the need to intimidate kids? He grinned suddenly and wondered if Malfoy and Severus Snape knew each other.

He set himself to rubbing his arms and legs again, trying to stimulate the blood flow and create some warmth in his shivering extremities.

He wasn't sure how many hours had passed before the cell door again appeared. He had spent them walking around the room, trying to rub heat into his shuddering frame. He had needed to relieve himself against one wall causing the scent of urine permeated the room, which added to his rising temper. He didn't mind being angry; that was much better than shuddering in fear.

With a shimmer, the wall morphed and the cell door appeared again. Before Harry could do anything, Lucius Malfoy cast a Petrificus Totalus, causing Harry to fall to the ground in a full body bind. The blonde sneered at him, unlocked the door with a silent spell and came into the room. He stood over the bound teen, allowing his

eyes to rake up and down the boy's body. "Not much to look at, are you Potter?" With a tsk of disappointment, he cast a Mobilicorpus and levitated the teen out of the cell and down the hallway.

Harry couldn't see anything except the top of the walls and the ceiling as his body was floated along, although he noticed Malfoy didn't care if he bumped into walls during the trip. He hit the sides of a stair case a number of times and realized he would have colorful bruises over a good portion of his body if he ever got out of this place alive.

They reached the top of the staircase and went down another corridor before Malfoy levitated him into what seemed like a large chamber. The Mobilicorpus was stopped abruptly and he fell several feet to the floor while still in the body bind. His eyes stared at the ceiling as he strained to hear what was happening around him. He thought he heard the rustling of robes and the quiet shifting of bodies and realized he was probably the prime act for whatever entertainment Riddle had planned for the night.

He was glad for the body bind when he heard a sibilant voice declare, "Ah, Harry Potter, how kind of you to join us for our festivities this evening."

Sirius and Remus remained quiet when Hospital security and the FBI finally permitted them to leave. They had each been force-fed calming draught and had barely escaped being stunned. Mendleson had assured them that the FBI was mobilizing a team to perform a search and rescue on Harry, but their fear was that the boy's health and safety would come second to capturing or killing Voldemort. It was two tense men that were finally permitted to apparate back to Black Manor.

Once inside the foyer they looked at each other. "Dumbledore?" asked Sirius with a grimace, "or go it alone?"

Remus' normal amber eyes were more yellow than normal as he looked at his friend. "I hate to think he's our best choice, but the FBI certainly isn't going to permit us to join them. But if we don't take some action, I don't know how much longer I'll be able to keep Moony under control."

"Let's try the Headmaster then. Perhaps we can convince him to call up the Order." They moved to the study and activated the Floo. "Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Scotland" demanded Sirius.

Green flames flared in the Headmaster's office alerting the elderly wizard to an incoming Floo call. He was surprised to see the head of Sirius Black calling out to him.

He smiled at the younger man and knelt down with an ease that belied his many years. "Sirius my dear boy! How are you?"

"Not good Albus. Harry has been kidnapped, by Lucius Malfoy we think. We believe that he's already in England." He was perversely pleased to see that the jovial face fell and the blue eyes closed briefly at the heartbreaking news. "The US government made some type of deal with Fudge for a joint task force and are mobilizing for what they call a 'search and rescue', but you know as well as I do that Harry's life will not be their primary concern. Can you get Fudge or Amelia to agree to include the Order? Remus and I want to be there to look out for Harry's wellbeing."

"I can contact both Cornelius and Amelia, but cannot guarantee they will permit the Order...hmm, I may have some leverage if I..." He paused as he considered the options. "I will see what I can do as well as investigate what their plans are."

The dark haired man relaxed noticeably. "Thank you, Albus. Remus and I will see about getting an international Floo or port key permit and will be there as soon as possible." He withdrew his head and turned to Remus. "Dragon hide armor and battle robes for both of us, plus secondary wands. Good thing we all had full protective gear made."

Remus shook his head as he said softly, "I wish Harry was wearing the same." He turned towards the stairs to go change, but stopped when a hand grasped his shoulder. "We'll get him back, Moony."

The gray haired man nodded briefly, "or die trying."

"Or die trying," Sirius agreed solemnly.

Harry seethed silently under the body bind, but was unable to even blink until it was released. "What Mr. Potter? Nothing to say to your host after I've gone to such lengths to welcome you to our festivities this evening?" A few snorts of amusement were audible from around the chamber. "Oh of course, how inconsiderate of me. Lucius, release our young...guest."

A softly smirked "Finite Incantatum" later, and Harry's muscles were again his own. He rolled slowly over to his stomach, and pushed himself up to his knees. He was in a large chamber, one that could almost be considered an audience hall that was filled with large figure dressed in black robes with white skull masks. On an elevated platform at the front of the room was an almost throne-like chair that hosted Lord Voldemort or Tom Riddle. He was tall and incredibly thin with a hairless skull and a very pale white face that featured wide crimson eyes with vertical slits for pupils. In place of a nose were two slits for nostrils.

Harry rocked back on his heels and rose with a little less grace than he wanted, but his muscles were stiff after the body bind. "Game on," he thought to himself. He gave a half bow in Riddle's direction and said, "How kind of you to have me, Tom. Of course, the invitation delivery was a bit plebian, but one can't be held responsible for one's minions." Harry had to hide his grin of victory as Riddle's eyes narrowed at his comments.

"For such a pathetic and scrawny specimen, you have a very inflated opinion of yourself Potter. I am Lord Voldemort, the Immortal Dark Lord and you would do well to remember that." The malevolent aura radiating off the man was stifling and made the teen want to gasp for air, but he stiffened his spine and put his acting skills to the test.

Harry managed a snort of amusement before responding, "Well yes, the Dark Lord Voldemort. I'm sure your mother and father would be so proud of all you've managed to accomplish. Why just look – you've managed to kidnap and strip a teenager! Woo, go Tom! I'm sure Merope and Tom Senior would be proud of their little pedophile."

He heard gasps from the black robed Death Eaters at hearing their Master described as a pedophile, and he only hoped it made them

question his appetites. He expected retribution for the insult, but he didn't expect an almost casually cast "Crucio".

The young teen's body immediately convulsed as agony unlike anything he could ever imagine ripped through his undersized frame. He thought every bone, muscle and nerve was being ripped to shreds, reformed and ruptured again. He was certain his very blood was boiling and would melt his veins before exploding through his skin. He wasn't even aware that he was screaming until the pain stopped and he realized his vocal chords were hoarse.

He lay on the ground, gasping for air, his muscles trembling from the after effects of the curse, the pain still coursing through his system, but at a reduced level.

The smooth sibilant tone mocked him, "Ah Harry my dear boy, you bring such entertainment to my drab existence. I was so disappointed when you decided to flee from me."

The teen pulled himself back up to his knees and looked at the snake-like visage in surprise. "Flee from you? You didn't even factor into the decision. I was trying to get away from Dumbledore more than anyone else."

To his surprise, the Dark Lord threw back his head and laughed an unpleasant hissing sound. "Dumbledore? You were fleeing Dumbledore? Oh, do explain." He pointed his wand at the teen, making it a demand, not a request.

This was one demand that Harry didn't mind obeying. "The old coot kidnapped me from the ruins of my parent's house after you killed my parents and abandoned me to magic-hating Muggles where I was starved and kept like a house elf for ten years. I grew up with no knowledge of my heritage. A bare month before the Hogwarts term began, I found out that I was not only a wizard, but famous because my mother gave me some type of protection against you." Riddle's eyes narrowed thoughtfully at that comment.

"Then I finally got to Hogwarts and found out that Dumbledore hired a possessed DADA teacher..." He paused and coughed -you - and coughed again "...who tried to kill me multiple times during the year. Did he protect me? Hell no. Plus he kept a sadistic bully of a Potions teacher.." he barely noticed the slight rustle of fabric as one of the

Death Eaters shifted position, "plus a ghost for History incapable of teaching."

He frowned at Riddle as he continued, "Was I given any counseling after being involved in Quirrel's death? Hell no, I was sent back to the abusive Muggles who locked me in a room and tried to starve me to death. The next year, your younger self possessed an eleven year old girl – and you do seem to have a fetish about possession, don't you - and released a basilisk. Did Dumbledore save the student and defeat the basilisk? Of course not. He did nothing and I wound up facing a twenty meter monster on my own. And what was my reward? Why being sent back to the abusive Muggles, of course! Why do you think I looked for another school?" He smirked at Voldemort. "I'm sorry Tom, but compared to Dumbledore, you're practically the Leader of the Light."

Thin lips smiled at him as Riddle responded, "Then why don't you join me, Harry. Together, we could be great."

Harry shook his head. "Mostly because your tactics are doomed to failure. See, you're ignoring the power that others wield, powers for which you have no defenses. Rather than being flexible and adapting to changing times, you're stuck in the past and will drag everyone down with you. My Battle Magics instructor always advises to either defend or go on the offensive from a position of strength, but you're defending a position of weakness and in the end it will crumble from within. Trying to build an empire built primarily on fear and intimidation hasn't succeeded in the long term throughout history, so why assume it would succeed now?"

As Harry distracted Voldemort with tales of his youth and why he didn't think the Dark Lord would be successful based on history, a major assault contingent assembled outside Riddle Manor in Little Hangleton.

Amelia Bones lifted her hands before the three score band of Aurors, a team of Unspeakables from the Department of Mystery, Muggle MI-5 agents, American FBI agents and members of the Order of the Phoenix. She had been extremely surprised to discover that the American FBI team had contacted their British MI-5 counterparts, and even more surprised to learn that a small contingent of that Muggle group knew about the wizarding world. She gave herself a mental shake and then cast a Muffliato beyond their perimeter and

then cast Sonorous on herself. "The details of this mission have already been discussed. In five minutes, the FBI team will attempt their magic suppression enchantment against Riddle Manor. The FBI and MI6 hell-e-cop-tores will provide an air assault while the ground forces move in. If the magic suppression does not drop the wards, then we will have to attempt a non-magical assault. We move in four minutes and 30 seconds." She cast a Quietus and prepared herself to face the most powerful Dark Lord of the century.

Voldemort shook his head as if amused at the antics of a toddler. "As amusing as your views are, my dear boy, we have delayed tonight's entertainment long enough." A wave of magic rolled across the room, tingling against everyone in the chamber. The Dark Lord's face scowled in rage as he felt the wards around the Manor evaporate.

Harry recognized the sound of helicopters overhead, pushed himself to his feet and began to grin at Voldemort. "You're done for, Tom. It's all over. The Fat Lady is beginning to sing."

Voldemort stabbed his wand at the officious teen and hissed, "Avada Kedavra". To the shock of everyone in the room, nothing happened. "Kill him!" he seethed.

Overhead, an odd whop-whop-whop sound unfamiliar to the wizards was getting louder and louder, almost shaking the building. Harry began to dodge around the room, as the Death Eaters tried to cast on him, although no spells were successful. Two loud explosions wracked the building and dust began to waft down from the ceiling. Oddly loud popping sounds began to filter down from the upper floors.

Harry came up behind Lucius Malfoy and kicked at the man's knees, causing him to collapse on the floor. He picked up the man's wand as it clattered to the floor. To his surprise, he saw the handle of a familiar wand exposed from the blonde's sleeve and quickly grabbed the holly wand in relief. He was shocked that the Death Eaters were still trying to cast on him rather than trying to stop him physically, but blessed his fortune and began running towards the nearest door.

Once in the hallway, he began to hear footsteps following him and kept running, turning corners, dodging through rooms and trying to leave a confused trail that the Death Eaters couldn't follow. He didn't

know the layout of the building and hoped he could find a window to break and escape from or at least a corner he could defend easily.

He turned a corner and ran into two figures and began to punch and kick. "Harry, stop! Harry!" He stopped in shock at hearing Remus' voice and was then grabbed in a rib-breaking hug from Sirius. "Thank Merlin, Harry. I was so afraid you would be dead!"

The sound of spell casting suddenly erupted behind them. "The magic suppression field must have failed" said a third voice that the teen didn't recognize. He saw three men dressed in black with large white letters on their backs. "Back up around the corner and let's try an orderly retreat."

Remus stripped off his robe and gave it to the teen as they followed the FBI agents. The warmth of the robe made him realize how bitterly cold he had been. "How are you here?"

"Quiet, not now" the FBI agent snapped as a Reducto flew past them.

Harry realized that Sirius and Remus had engaged two death eaters that had tried to circle around and attack them from behind. "Miserable cowards," he heard Sirius mutter as the former prisoner cast a Reducto and Diffindo while Remus shielded them both.

"Did you think to escape me, Harry," hissed the one voice the teen didn't want to hear again. The boy dodged a body bind then ducked and cast a Defodio towards the Dark Lord, who didn't even bother evading it, instead he allowed a glowing shield to absorb the spell.

Voldemort sneered at the dark-haired teen and hissed, "Pathetic. I have no idea why the prophecy thought you could defeat me. You're nothing but a weak and useless brat. Unfortunately, it appears I don't have time to play with you any longer. Avada Kedavra!" A green bolt hurtled towards Harry, who dove out of the way, only to be hit from a spray of stones as a Confringo landed near him.

He shook his head, trying to clear the black edges from his eyesight. He saw Voldemort raise his wand, but over the pale figure's shoulder, he saw a cadre of FBI agents who raised weapons similar to pistols. Two others raised their wands and cast multiple curses to break the Dark Lord's shields. Multiple brightly colored flares came

from the hand-held weapons which spewed pellets that struck and covered Voldemort and nearby death eaters. Immediately, fabric and skin began to bubble and dissolve as acid swathed the targets.

Voldemort tried to cast a counter curse to repel the acid, but Harry remembered what had happened in First Year and jumped towards the man and grabbed his wand hand. Just as it happened with Professor Quirrell, Voldemort's skin began to smoke where Harry's hand touched him. The Dark Lord tried to shake off the boy and cast the counter curse, but Harry's delay permitted the acid to eat through his vocal cords. Harry gasped at the sight of Voldemort's face and jumped back, his eyes widening in horror. The Dark Lord raised his hands and his fingers clawed at the bubbling skin that peeled back to expose startling white bone under the blood and gristle.

The body fell and a hazy black essence arose from the corpse. Unspeakables from the DoM began to chant in Latin and a sphere appeared around the spirit. It howled in outrage, turning in one direction after another, but was repelled each time it touched the boundary of the sphere. They cast another sphere around the first and then enlarged a peculiar silvery box. The spheres were levitated into the box and locked securely.

Remus and Sirius collapsed next to Harry, and held him close. He vaguely heard people speaking around them. "Let's get four teams to secure the building and the perimeter. Parker, take two teams to secure the prisoners. Medics see to the injured here and prepare for transport as needed." The stress of the last day finally caught up with the teen, and he allowed welcoming darkness to envelope him.

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Chapter 15 – A New Beginning

Dark Lord Defeated!

In a surprise revelation yesterday, Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge announced that the DMLE and the Unspeakables coordinated a decisive strike against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named resulting in the Dark Lord's defeat and the capture of many Death Eaters.

"Through tenacious resolve and an indefatigable focus on the protection of the citizens of Great Britain, the Ministry located the Dark Lord's stronghold. Our superbly trained Aurors and Unspeakables then attacked with an overwhelming force and won a momentous victory" said the Minister. "In an unprecedented show of international cooperation, auxiliary support was provided by a law enforcement branch of the United States magical government. We thank our cousins across the ocean for their encouragement and backing."

The names of the captured Death Eaters have not been released, but the Director of the DMLE, Amelia Bones stated that "All prisoners will be examined for the Dark Mark and interrogated using Veritaserum to ascertain whether they were willing followers of the Dark Lord or coerced through curses, potions or other means. Swift trials will be scheduled for his willing supporters." In the Dark Lord's first reign of terror, several prominent citizens declared that they compelled to serve through the Unforgiveable Imperius curse.

Rumors that a branch of the Muggle law enforcement or that Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived was involved in the victory against the Dark Lord were unsubstantiated.

Harry Potter snorted in disgust as Sirius finished reading the Daily Prophet article from the secure room at St. Mungos where the teen was under observation for a day due to the effects of the Cruciatus curse. "So it was thanks to Fudge's 'tenacious resolve and indefatigable focus' that Voldemort was defeated? Do you suppose he can really spin it that way?"

Sirius ruffled his godson's black hair, making it messier than before. "He's a politician. They have an infinite ability to view the world

through their own special brand of rose-colored glasses. Do you mind that the public doesn't know you were there?"

The teen rolled his eyes at the older man. "Are you joking? I don't need any more publicity, good or bad. For all I know, the Daily Prophet would begin calling me the next Dark-Lord-in-Training or some such nonsense. Besides, I didn't actually vanquish him. I just helped delay him from casting a counter-curse to the acid pellets. I only hope that everyone now agrees that Trelawney's thrice-cursed prophecy has finally been fulfilled."

Remus spoke up from the doorway. "I saw Albus down the hall, but was able to convince him that you weren't up to visitors because of the after-effects of the Cruciatus." Harry stiffened at hearing the Headmaster's name, but then relaxed and smiled his thanks at Remus for his skillful deflection of the manipulative old man. Remus noticed the teen's reaction and said gently, "we do have Albus to thank for getting Sirius and I involved in the search and rescue effort. He had to pull quite a few strings to the Order included so that we could be there."

The teen sighed and nodded in agreement. "OK, so he came through that time. It doesn't mean that I forgive him for everything else he's done over the years. I don't know if I'll ever be able to forgive him for trying to enslave me to that prophecy."

"Well, you'll be happy to know that he said even if the prophecy hadn't been fulfilled before, it probably was last night," Remus smiled.

"Finally," Sirius barked loudly. "It's about time!"

"What about the...what did the Headmaster call them when he tried to force me to return? Horcruxes?"

The gentle werewolf grinned. "Per Albus, Amelia Bones is taking over the search and destruction of those. Fudge apparently tried to insist that the spheres containing Voldemort's spirit be sent through the Veil immediately, but Amelia is insistent that every horcrux be destroyed first."

Sirius looked somber as he considered that. "Let's just hope that the Unspeakables in the Department of Mystery don't decide to

'experiment' on His spirit and somehow set him loose." All three shivered at the thought.

Amelia Bones looked up at the polite knock on her door and waved in the two American FBI agents. "Special Agents Sheppard and Peterson please come in and have a seat. I trust is your team fully recovered now?"

There had been no deaths on the side of the collaborating forces, but two FBI agents and two Aurors had sustained curse injuries that required hospitalization. One FBI agent had received a Breath Stealing curse that shut down his lungs. Fortunately, the FBI medics had known the counter curses.

"Thank you, Madame Bones. The team is in good health again." He waited politely for her to give permission to proceed.

With a brief nod she asked, "What can I do for you today?"

"My Director asked me to follow up on extradition proceedings for Lucius Malfoy. Will we be permitted to try him in the United States, or will he be sent to prison here first?"

Amelia shuffled through her in-box and pulled out a letter and perused it briefly. "Yes, the Director emphasized your government's desire for Mr. Malfoy to stand trial in the United States. There were some in the Ministry that wanted to believe the man's protestations of innocence due to coercion, but fortunately the Wizengamot supported my call to have every captured person interrogated under Veritaserum. He was questioned last night and admitted to freely taking the Dark Mark during the Dark Lord's first reign of terror. As a result, he is now an embarrassment to the Minister, so I was able to gain approval for the extradition." Her smile of satisfaction caused the Special Agent to make a mental note not to get on her bad side. The stories regarding the dagger prominently displayed on her desk hadn't hurt her reputation with the visiting agents either.

He stood and gave her a half bow. "Thank you, Madame Bones. I will arrange a detail to escort Mr. Malfoy to the United States at your convenience."

Minerva McGonagall was pleased to see the dark-clad figure of the Potions Master reading the newspaper impassively at the breakfast

table three days after the defeat of Voldemort. He had been taken into custody and interrogated after the rescue mission and she had been worried that Albus wouldn't be able to save him a second time. She had volunteered to speak in his behalf, but hadn't been called. She smiled affectionately at him when he looked up as she seated herself beside him.

He inclined his head politely, "Good morning, Minerva."

She gave him a small smile and nod, "Good morning, Severus. Welcome back." The taciturn man simply raised one eyebrow and returned to his newspaper.

Minerva hid another smile at his behavior and unfolded her own paper. She poured herself a cup of tea and began to read through the front page stories before the rest of the staff arrived.

Lucius Malfoy to be Extradited to the United States!

In a surprising move, the Ministry of Magic has agreed to extradite prominent pureblood Lucius Malfoy to the United States for crimes allegedly committed in that country.

Malfoy was arrested at Voldemort's stronghold two nights ago and detained for questioning. Under DMLE Director Amelia Bones' new policies, all subjects detained during that raid were to be checked for the Dark Mark and questioned under Veritaserum. While it was known after the trials in the 1980's that the well-known patron of many political and humanitarian causes had been coerced under the Imperius curse to take the Dark Mark, under Veritaserum interrogation, Malfoy admitted that he had taken it freely during the Dark Lord's first reign. He also admitted to supporting You-Know-Who's reign of terror and criminal activities and was named as a participant or co-conspirator in over 40 criminal acts.

He is reported to stand accused of entering the United States illegally, attempted murder of two American citizens, as well as kidnapping and intent to commit murder of another American citizen. If convicted of all crimes, he would face the death penalty or life imprisonment without the possibility of parole. If he is not convicted, he will be returned to Great Britain to serve his term in Azkaban for his admitted Death Eater activities.

Minerva looked over at the Slytherin table, but didn't see Draco Malfoy. Perhaps it was simply too early yet, she considered. However, she had to wonder how many of their students would be impacted by having one or more family members imprisoned or Kissed. She would need to work with the other Heads of House to make sure the students were properly cared for. There was a rumor that the Ministry was trying to confiscate all assets of proven Death Eaters, whether that left their families destitute or not. They would have to make sure that everyone had a place to stay and possibly try to obtain scholarship funding for students that needed help with tuition.

She lowered her eyes to the next article and then glanced quickly over at the Potions Master, who was studiously paying attention to his breakfast.

Potions Master Severus Snape Exonerated

Potions Master and Hogwarts Potions Professor Severus Snape was once again exonerated for his crimes, even though he bears the Dark Mark of a Death Eater. After the first defeat of You-Know-Who in 1981, Albus Dumbledore championed the young Potions Master and stated that he had acted as a spy for the Light while feigning to be a spy for the Dark Lord.

It is reported that when the Dark Lord rose again after the dark ritual that led to the death of retired Auror Alastair Moody, Snape returned to Him and agreed to spy upon Albus Dumbledore and the Light, but was purportedly a double-agent actually working for Dumbledore again.

Under both truth spell and Veritaserum, Snape declared emphatically that he was a spy acting on behalf of the Light, although he did admit to having to commit crimes to maintain his cover as a loyal Death Eater. Albus Dumbledore insisted that the Potions Master saved innumerable lives by delivering information about planned attacks.

Senior Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt also spoke on behalf of the reported spy saying, "Snape may be one of the more unpleasant men I know, but he's also one of the bravest I've ever met. He put his life on the line every time he went in front of the Dark Lord. When the assault occurred on the Death Eater stronghold, he supported

the Aurors during the fighting, then surrendered his wand and gave himself up. He deserves an Order of Merlin for the lives he saved as an undercover agent."

Snape was released without being charged with any crimes, but is required to maintain a monthly review with the DMLE for the next two years.

Minerva McGonagall closed the paper and looked over at her colleague who was sipping his coffee, after having read the newspaper with an impassive face. "I am sorry, Severus," she said quietly. "Shacklebolt is correct; you deserve an Order of Merlin for everything you've been through."

The Potions Master sneered, "Spies are simply an embarrassment for the victors after the smoke clears and no one wants to reward a former Death Eater. The best I could hope to expect was obscurity."

The stern older woman pursed her lips. "It doesn't mean I have to like it, Severus. You risked your life daily." She leaned over and laid a hand over his. "I hope you know that I respect and admire you for everything you did."

The speed with which his eyes flashed to hers was the only emotional reaction he displayed. After several moments, he nodded briefly and she squeezed his hand before releasing it. He looked down momentarily before meeting her eyes again and added, "I do plan to resign my position at Hogwarts in another year or two and dedicate my time to research Deputy Headmistress. However, I first need to make sure that all of my snakes are safe and well."

Minerva nodded ruefully. He had never enjoyed teaching, especially the younger years. His passion was in making and improving potions. "I understand. It doesn't mean I won't miss you, though. I had already thought about the need to meet with all House Heads to make sure any affected students had housing and tuition available. Your thoughts on a potential new Head for Slytherin would also be welcome. Perhaps you could train your successor."

He relaxed marginally at her concern for the students and inclined his head again before leaving to begin his discussions with his snakes.

Sirius Black paused outside the office door and tried to find any reason not to knock. He really didn't want to have this conversation, but it was the right thing to do. Both Harry and Remus had agreed and had encouraged him – almost pushed him out the Manor door – to proceed. After talking to Minerva, she also directed him to his current location. "Come on Padfoot," he muttered to himself, "so it's not going to be pleasant. Where's your Gryffindor courage?" He took a deep breath and knocked on the office door.

"Enter!" called the silky baritone sharply.

Severus Snape looked up from the book he was reviewing while standing at an overflowing bookcase and his face immediately twisted in aversion and hostility when he recognized his visitor. "Black, what are you doing here," he spat.

"Take it easy, Snape. I'm here on behalf of the students, especially those with parents caught in the raid on Riddle Manor."

The Potions Master looked at him with cold suspicion, then turned with a swish of his robes and sat behind his desk. "Speak," he snapped grimly.

Sirius couldn't help it; he really couldn't. "Woof!" he responded and then chuckled at the contempt on the other man's face. "Sorry, but you have to admit that you asked for it." He sat down, a bit more relaxed now.

"You don't like me and you have reason, Snape." His cheeks flushed in embarrassment as he remembered Harry's disapproval of the Marauders pranks against their contemporary. "I was bullied by Dudley and his gang my whole life, Padfoot," the teen had said. "What was funny to them was cruel and humiliating to me. What made you act like such bullies? How would you have liked being targeted like that?"

When confronted by his godson and his perspective, the older man had to stop and really consider his actions as a Hogwarts student. How would he have loved to say he would have been good-natured about the pranks, but to be honest, some of them were pretty cruel. No, he had to admit that he would have been furious and would have retaliated against anyone who played those tricks. "I'm sorry,

Pup. All I can say is that we were fifteen and idiots." It had taken another hour before his godson had softened enough to forgive him.

Sirius returned his attention to the Potions Master who was looking at him skeptically. "Yes, I admit that you have reason not to like me. I was an idiot when I was at Hogwarts. Harry called me a bully and described how he had been bullied his whole life. I had no right to be outraged on his behalf when I acted just like his bully of a cousin." He felt exposed and defenseless admitting this to Snape, but forced himself to continue. "I didn't think of myself as a bully, but as a prankster. You seemed to give as good as you got and I told myself that it was OK. But it wasn't." He met the other man's mistrustful eyes with as much sincerity as he could muster. "I was wrong and I apologize."

After several moments Snape said curtly, "What does that have to do with today's students?"

"I've heard that the Ministry is going to try to confiscate the assets of convicted Death Eaters." Sirius frowned at the short-sightedness of the Wizengamot members. "That could leave entire families without a home or resources. I have several properties in England that can be refurbished to provide housing for families and am willing to provide scholarships to students in need."

A slight widening of Snape's eyes and the lifting of one eyebrow was the only immediate reaction, so Sirius continued, "The Blacks are purebloods and an Ancient and Noble House that would be accepted by many of the families affected. My cousin Andromeda Tonks would oversee the scholarships and meet with the students twice a year to see review their grades and see if they need something beyond normal tuition, books and uniforms. While this will affect students in all Houses, I thought you might have the best insight into how to approach the students." He sat back in his chair and waited for the Head of Slytherin to respond.

Severus took a deep breath and tried to adjust as all of his perceptions twisted and warped. Sirius Black, the Gryffindor who loathed and despised Slytherins wanted to help his students? He looked at the man who tried to kill him years ago and shook his head slightly. "Why do you care what becomes of the children of Death Eaters Black? What's in it for you," he asked with distrust. He wasn't going to hand his students over only to be crushed later.

Sirius grimaced. "I deserved that. OK, you want honesty? You want me to bare my soul? Fine, I get my godson's respect, and that means a great deal to me." He leaned forward and said fervently, "Snape, this is the right thing to do. If the families are abandoned now, they will be fertile pickings for the next Dark Lord. I don't want that to happen. The Blacks have a dark enough history to be accepted by the dark families, and have a light family Head now that will be accepted by the neutral and light families. I have the properties that can be converted to give families living space, and possibly can provide work for those that want it."

The Potions Master stared at his old adversary, trying to find any hidden deceptions in his proposal. "You are proposing to house not only the students, but their families as well? For how long?"

Sirius leaned forward and nodded earnestly. "I have at least three good-sized properties standing empty that can hold quite a few people. Of course, I don't know the size of the families." He frowned for a few seconds and then added, "If those properties are insufficient, perhaps I should look into buying an apartment complex." He shook his head and looked again at Snape. "And it would be as long as it takes for them to become self-sufficient. I only have a few rules that would apply to anyone who takes me up on my offer."

Snape narrowed his eyes, certain that Black's plot would now come to light. "And what precisely would those rules be?"

"Hogwarts House affiliation stays at Hogwarts; I won't have Gryffindors attacking Slytherins or Slytherins attacking Hufflepuffs just because of their House while they are under my roof. They will be expected to maintain minimum grade requirements or class rank, but I'll want to work with you and the other House Heads to determine what those requirements should be." He stood and began pacing, his eyes getting animated and his voice rising in his excitement.

"Think about all we can do! Perhaps we could offer work-study programs and internships. Each of my properties has a steward and each one could probably help some who want to study estate management. I'll probably have to hire a Healer who travels between the properties, and maybe some students would be

interested in a Healing apprenticeship." He began gesturing in large sweeping gestures as he paced. "And a school for the younger students! And if anyone is interested in teaching, they could intern in the school. Think of the possibilities, Snape!"

The Potions Master leaned back, staring at the passionate man in amazement. Black was being candid; the former spy would bet his life on it. "My NEWT level students would be able to prepare the potions a healer would need, such as headache and stomach draughts and basic healing potions," he offered.

Sirius turned to him with a wide grin. "Excellent! And if they want to pursue Healing or a Potions Mastery, it would be good experience for them." He realized he was halfway across the room and returned to his seat sheepishly, before leaning forward towards the other man. "What do you think, Snape? Will you help me set up something for the families in need?"

Severus inclined his head slowly. "I would not be opposed to participating in future discussions," he affirmed. "I will work with Minerva, Filius and Pomona to draft some proposals regarding minimal scholastics requirements and potential internship outlines."

Sirius beamed at the man he had once despised. "Thank you, Snape. I want to offer some hope to devastated families as quickly as possible, so perhaps we can draft a common letter from the House Heads introducing the concept to their students. That way, they and any remaining parents, guardians or siblings won't be shocked when I contact them."

"We should be able to have that notification by end of day tomorrow." The Potions Master looked at the other man warily. "You do realize that some families may be less than trusting of offers of assistance. They may even request that you pledge an Oath that you will not betray or abandon them."

To his surprise, the other man chuckled. "Harry said the same thing. He said after being perceived as dark by the Ministry and the general public as well as betrayed and abused by the Dark Lord, they will need more tangible proof of my sincerity. I can't say I blame them, although if their situation is desperate enough, they'll at least make use of what I offer until they have other viable options. I just want to avoid the other option being another Dark Lord."

Snape's thin lips twitched in a smirk. "Perhaps it will be feasible that we will be able to cooperate after all, Black."

Harry flopped down on his bed and looked around his room in contentment. Sirius and Remus had kept the press and even Dumbledore away from him, although he had given two statements to Amelia Bones and another to Special Agent Sheppard. Now that Voldemort was contained and a search was on for his horcruxes so that they could be destroyed, he finally had the chance to live a normal life. They had just returned home from Britain, and he savored the feeling.

Home. He had a real home with Sirius and Remus. He had gone from being an unwelcome and despised orphan to having adults who had proven that they not only wanted and loved him, but that they would put their lives on the line for him. He finally had learned that the Dursleys were the freaks, not him. Normal people do not lock children in cupboards and normal people do not let children continually be hungry. He had a feeling that Sirius had talked with Madame Bones about the Dursleys, as their treatment of him had come up in the second interview.

He was going to return to St. Croix at the beginning of the week, but for the next few days he would catch up with his friends around the world and give Sirius and Remus the time they needed so that they were willing to let him out of their sight again. At least Sirius had a new project that would keep him busy. Harry was quite proud of his formerly bigoted godfather. He had gone from detesting anyone wearing green and silver to being willing to give them another chance at life.

Sirius stood in the doorway watching his godson stare up at the ceiling with a fond smile. "What are you thinking of, Pup?" he asked.

Harry turned and beamed a grin at the older man. "I was just thinking that after ten years in Durskaban and then another two years in a magical castle filled with both magic and danger, I'm finally going to get a normal life. I have a nice normal home and I'm going back to a nice normal school. Maybe I'm going to get a 'happily ever after' ending", he added with a wry grin.

"To be perfectly serious, all's well that ends well," Sirius agreed with a smirk. He caught the pillow that came his way and descended on his godson with an evil grin. When Remus came to investigate the noise, he walked in to a snowstorm of feathers and two equally grinning and unrepentant faces.

The End

Thank you for reading "It's My Life" through to its conclusion. I sincerely appreciated everyone who stayed with the story, submitted reviews, provided corrections or otherwise let me know your comments about the story.

Lastly, my thanks and appreciation to JK Rowling who created the Harry Potter world and permits budding writers to use her characters in our own stories.